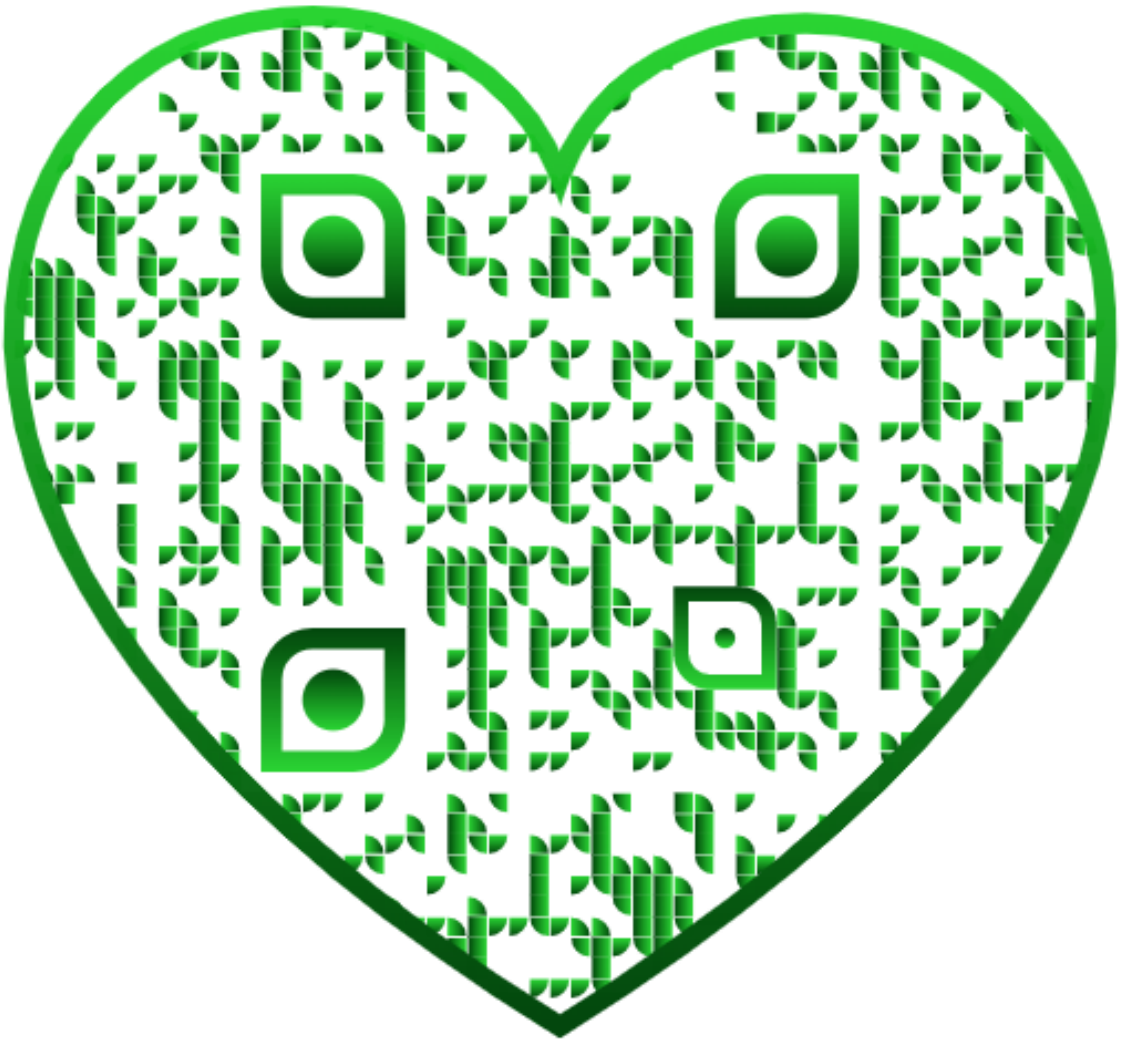
Rolling Stone UK
JUNE/JULY 2024
ISSUE 017

AC/DC MEETS DIRE STRAITS
Brian Johnson and Mark Knopfler in conversation

A. G. COOK
The past, present and future world of the hyperpop king

+
Meekz
Becky Hill
St. Vincent
Ncuti Gatwa
Glass Animals
Omar Apollo
Toni Sancho
Nell Mescal
Freya Allan
Girl in Red
Victor Alli
Shabaka
Songer
K-Trap

CHARLI XCX
Anatomy of a (3-D) female pop star



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CHARLI WEARS DRESS
BY **ISSEY MIYAKE**

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Tyrell Hampton**

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Contributors

Tyrell Hampton
Photographer

Love Charli! I feel like I was living vicariously through her on this shoot. We had been talking about doing something for a while, but we both travel so much. The shoot went by very fast because we were basically playing dress-up and vibing the whole time. For our first formal project, I think we ate.

Emmanuel Onapa
Writer and journalist

My work has been featured in publications such as *Dazed*, *I-D*, *Metro*, *Evening Standard* and more, having interviewed the likes of Ghetts, Potter Payper, D Double E, Kenny Allstar and Kwesi Johnson. I was recently nominated for the Criminal Justice Alliance Outstanding Journalism Award in 2022. In my writing, I am interested in how marginalised experiences in the UK fit into larger political, social and cultural frameworks. In the pages of Rolling Stone UK, musicians' voices ring out loud and clear, reminding us of the power of British music to transcend boundaries and to unite a generation. I've been listening to K-Trap since 2018 and Meekz for a couple of years now, and I consider them cultural icons who use their art to inspire and uplift a whole generation. It was good to reflect that in my interviews with them in this issue. Here's to K-Trap and Meekz — two generational talents who demonstrate an unwavering commitment to keeping the rap game real.

Anna Smith
Film critic and writer

I enjoyed meeting Freya Allan in Soho. I was impressed by how mature and calm she seemed for her age — when I was 22, I was an excitable journalism graduate editing a dance music magazine in a messy office, with drum'n'bass blaring out of the speakers. Since moving to film journalism, I've been a writer for the *Guardian* and *Time Out*, president of the Critics' Circle and a host of the BBC News channel's *Film Review*. I've also co-founded the *Girls on Film* podcast, championing women in film. We've had 10 Oscar-winners on the podcast, but I'm equally proud of featuring rising young stars like Freya. She's talented, determined and really starting to engage with conversations about gender balance and representation on screen. Can't wait to see what she does next.

Nick Reilly
Content editor

It genuinely feels like five minutes since I stepped into Rolling Stone UK HQ for the first time in September 2021 and linked up with the team to create the first-ever UK edition of the world's leading music, film, TV, politics and pop culture magazine. But nearly three years later, we're older, wiser, greyer (well, certainly in my case) and excited to dish up our 17th issue. Time flies! Within these pages you'll find my chat with Nell Mescal — a brilliant artist who Rolling Stone UK has championed from the very start. I also loved chatting to St. Vincent about tackling the meaning of life on her excellent new record *All Born Screaming*, and had half an hour with pure rock royalty in the form of AC/DC's Brian Johnson and guitar hero Marc Knopfler. Enjoy the issue!

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Editor's Letter

End music's "boys' club"

RAYE'S RECORD-BREAKING Brit Awards haul signalled the beginning of a magnificent year for women in music.

Flying the British flag proudly, The Last Dinner Party scored a number one album to universal acclaim while also picking up a number of awards for their arrival on the scene – including a Rolling Stone UK Rising Star 2023 Award. Dua Lipa is headlining Glastonbury while blending elevated dance with perfect pop, a couple months after Charli XCX had 40,000 fans clamouring to see her spin at the most in-demand Boiler Room set ever. This June, Miss XCX is ready to drop her nerviest album yet, a throbbing barrage of slick, club-ready tunes.

Deeper into the dance floor, Nia Archives has flawlessly fused jungle and Britpop, while Peggy Gou is producing house music so refined it's sweeter than sugar. Meanwhile, a year after 'Padam Padam' became the song of the summer, Kylie Minogue was celebrated as one of the TIME100: The Most Influential People of 2024, proving that female artists don't need to be Millennials or Gen Z'ers to be popular or relevant.

Across the Atlantic, Ariana Grande dropped a deeply personal album, before Beyoncé magnificently reclaimed country music and single-handedly elevated a raft of Black country artists who had struggled to be heard. Weeks later, Taylor Swift swept everyone aside to claim the Top 14 spots on the Billboard Hot 100 with an intimate collection of songs that held nothing back. Elsewhere, St. Vincent released a self-reflective masterpiece, and the OG Rolling Stone magazine spotlighted Billie Eillish on its US cover with an unapologetically frank interview ahead of dropping her third album.

What is exceptionally empowering is that even among the club-ready beats of this issue's cover star Charli XCX's forthcoming album *brat*, women in music have an autonomy to add the kind of emotional dexterity to their music that feels lacking in the bravado-rich sounds of most male artists today. Unfettered by masculine rigidity, Charli is unafraid to celebrate womanhood in all its complicated-yet-soul-baringly simple glory while simultaneously serving the sickest beats. It's an unrelenting and engrossing record – and utterly addictive.

But it isn't all roses. While front-of-stage female artists are flying high, backstage there is work to be done. We still have a way to go before we have genuine parity in music, where women are treated fairly and respectfully, and festival line-ups enjoy a 50/50 gender split. It doesn't help that in April the UK government rejected recommendations suggested by the landmark *Misogyny in Music* report to improve gender equality in the industry. The report, unveiled in January by the Women and Equalities Committee, warned that "urgent action" was needed to tackle the huge amounts of misogyny and discrimination faced by women in music, to tackle the "boys' club" rife with sexual harassment and abuse, which is often not reported.

"The *Misogyny in Music* report should have been a moment of immediate and lasting change for the music industry," said Deborah Annetts, chief executive of the Independent Society of Musicians. "The report laid bare the incredibly serious problems the sector has, and the entirely reasonable steps government should take to rectify them. For the government to choose not to make music safer for women is painfully disappointing, if sadly not surprising. The brilliant women who make our music industry what it is deserve better."

Damn right.

CLIFF JOANNOU
EDITOR IN CHIEF

ON THE COVER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TYRELL HAMPTON

CREATIVE DIRECTION & STYLING BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

CHARLI WEARS SHIRT BY GANT, BIKINI BRIEFS BY MIU MIU, SHOES BY VERSACE

HAIR BY JILLIAN HALOUSKA AT THE WALL GROUP

MAKEUP BY LAUREN HALOUSKA AT BRYANT ARTISTS

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The art of noise

After the success of the Beoplay EX and Beosound 2 3rd Generation range, Bang & Olufsen has launched a striking new Northern Sky Turquoise colourway of its lauded headphones (£599) and personal speakers (£4,699). Inspired by the colours of the arctic, the new versions add a fresh feel to the boundary-pushing earbuds and beautiful speakers. Both pieces are equally top-of-the-range music listening devices as they are striking additions to your personal style.

A life in pictures

Welcome to Fragile Beauty, a new exhibition at the V&A spotlighting the photography collection of Sir Elton John and David Furnish. In partnership with Gucci, the exhibition — which features works these two creative polymaths have on the walls of their home — spans over 300 stills by more than 100 photographers. Artwork by Robert Mapplethorpe, Cindy Sherman, William Eggleston and more will appear in the exhibition, which runs from 18 May to 5 January 2025. As well as fashion and celebrity, it will also touch on Elton and Furnish's relationship, and their work as ambassadors and cultural trailblazers, spotlighting AIDS activism and the Civil Rights Movement.

DAVID LACHAPELLE, ELTON JOHN: EGG ON HIS FACE, NEW YORK, 1999 © DAVID LACHAPELLE

Crystal clear

Audemars Piguet's love affair with music has led to many a collaboration with artists from every genre. The latest is with long-standing friend of the brand and watch collector, seven-time Grammy award-winning singer and guitarist, John Mayer (pictured). He has teamed up with the Swiss Haute Horlogerie manufacturer to design the new iteration of the Royal Oak Perpetual Calendar, the last to be fitted with the label's selfwinding Calibre 5134. The 200-piece, limited-edition watch has been created in 18-carat white gold with a rich blue dial. Mayer worked particularly closely with the Audemars Piguet team on the face to get it looking as perfect as a clear (and sparkling) blue sky.

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Life through a lens

FUJIFILM INSTAX has launched the new INSTAX MINI 99 instant camera, a portable and unmissable addition to your packing list for summer 2024's festival season. Users can add personal artistic touches to their photos through a new manual vignette switch, and various shooting modes. Complete with self-timer mode for group photos and a tripod, it's the perfect companion for capturing summer memories. £174.99

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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

Heart on his sleeve

Fred Roberts' new EP delivers an honest depiction of his first queer love affair, and it's this authentic approach that's winning him plenty of fans

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **Jono White**

"*YOU LOVED ME through the darkness of a cinema*," Fred Roberts sings on 'Disguise'. "*Where movies played but none of them ever told our truth*."

Since that song and real-life story of secret love debuted in December 2023, the 21-year-old has found a captive audience with fans who have hailed him as a leading voice in the current rung of artists delivering queer pop that packs an almighty punch.

"You can chuck as much money as you like at a song, but you can't buy that pure connection that is born out of experience and many years of me living and finding a romantic connection with someone," he explains.

But this is just one side of Roberts' sound. His debut single, 'Runaway', was soaked in synth-pop hooks and the kind of chorus that feels fit to bring an arena to its knees. Or to put it another way: there's seemingly no limit to what Fred Roberts and his music is truly capable of achieving...

We're speaking the day before your EP arrives. How's everything in the world of Fred Roberts right now?

I'm so excited. I think on one hand all I've ever wanted to do is release an EP, you know what I mean? I want to release music that isn't singular songs and has the context of being part of a bigger thing. That's what I gravitate towards, and these five tracks are together, and they tell a strong story. But at the same time, it's like, 'Ah! I have to do the next thing now.'

What is the story of your debut EP then?

I just started writing in lockdown, and I had never really picked apart any of my life before. I think I just went through life as a teenager, and you're not meant to stop and look back at everything you've done. You just experience things, and you don't really think too hard about them. But in lockdown I think everything stopped. I had way too much time to pick things apart, and my writing was literally my story. 'Runaway', the opening song, is me at the end of a journey with someone after seeing them for a long time and coming to terms with the fact that I don't feel that sense of resentment towards them anymore.

And then the rest of the EP details exactly how I was feeling during that time with that person from the ages of 15 to 17. The last song, meanwhile, is just me right now. It's my experience written in the most honest way and sounding like the songs that I love.

Has it been a cathartic experience then? Scary, maybe?

Well, I think people are connecting with it because they are aware that I'm not making any of this up. When someone hears it and they relate themselves to parts of my story, it means it's real and it's working. But yes, terrifying, too. 'Disguise', for example, is about the most intimate experience I've ever had. It's cool that everyone knows about it now, but in a normal scenario they might not!

I've literally rounded off that part of my life now though. I've written these songs; I've told my story, and this EP is called *Sound of My Youth* for a reason.

How has the reaction to 'Disguise' been for you? SiriusXM's Larry Flick hailed it for reflecting "an emotional tug of war that is unique to a young queer person".

When I started writing music when I was growing up, Troye Sivan provided that for me. I listened to his music, and I saw myself in him and I understood how it worked. But I never thought I'd get to be a part of that. It's on a smaller scale, but as Larry explained, it's got a message that can transcend.

You can chuck as much money as you like at a song, but you can't buy that pure connection that is born out of experience and many years of me living and finding a romantic connection with someone. I think with 'Disguise' too, it reflects that unique experience of love when

you're gay or queer. It's so powerful to find a community of people who relate to that song and gravitate towards it. I once got a message from a guy called Dylan and he was 17 and told me that the words in that song really reflected what he was going through. It can be the coolest thing ever when you find a song like that, and the fact I'm able to make it is just crazy!

That specific situation — were people aware of it before you released the song?

I came out to my family when I was 16, so it was just before that. He was part of my life, but I don't think people knew the exact situation, and when you're that young no one's going to ask you, are they? It took me a while to be open about the experience because he was kept undercover, and I think I put up a load of barriers and I shut myself off.

He actually sent me a message last week asking if the song was about him! But we've grown up, and 'Runaway' is even about not hating him because we were young and you have these experiences and people learn, and now we're older, and it's formed this circle where he apologised, which is nice closure.

That lad, Dylan, who messaged you, really speaks to the close bonds that Gen-Z pop stars have with their fans too, doesn't it?

Yeah, and it's weird because the level of engagement and interaction I've received from people, you only get those fans when you're at a Harry Styles level. But I think people wanna be part of a smaller thing too, to find friends and connect with people, and they wanna queue outside of a concert and meet new people. It's forming new spaces for people to interact in: they're not passively listening to the music, they're engaging with it and they're creating stuff around it.

You were on *The X Factor: The Band* before branching out as a solo artist. What was that experience like and what made you want to enter that world?

It was just a fun day out, really. I mean, I'd done my GCSEs, and I went to Reading Festival and I saw all these people performing and just wondered how it had happened. An audition for *X Factor*, which I went to with my mum, felt like the answer. I never expected in a million years that I'd get through the first round, but it gave me the confidence, irrespective of everything else, that I desperately needed to do music.

I wanted to sing and write songs, but when you go to an academic school and you have no connections in the industry, it does feel like another world, do you know what I mean? How on Earth do you break into it? That foot in the door really helped me when I came off the show because it was a spark I needed, and I met a producer and an A&R from being on the show, too. When we lost, it felt like the worst thing that had happened to me. But it was almost the perfect scenario. I had no ties to a label; I could just do whatever I wanted. So, it was a good experience.

Did it help you see the reality of what the industry is like too?

Yes! Because I was living the dream and then it got shattered, which teaches you that things don't last forever. It's been good to realise that overnight success would be a dream, but it's just not how I wanna do this forever. I want to build a fan base and I want to keep hold of the dedicated, passionate people that care about my music and my art and keep developing that. Things like that don't happen with an overnight success on TikTok. It's finding that balance of staying true to who I am and realising the reason people are liking the music is because it's literally me making exactly what I wanna make. That's what I want to keep doing.

And the rest of 2024 for you is...?

More music! I want to release one more single before the summer and continue to write. But the reception for the first three songs isn't something I was expecting and playing all these festivals as a result of that. I'm playing Boardmasters, which is one I always loved growing up. I'm just hoping that people will continue to connect with the EP, and I can continue what I'm doing! **NICK REILLY**

"'Disguise' reflects that unique experience of love when you're gay or queer. It's so powerful to find a community of people who relate to that song"

CONNECTION
Roberts has built a close relationship with his fans

JONO WHITE

RS RECOMMENDS

STAY ON TRACK WITH OUR PICK OF THE LATEST ONES TO WATCH

Esme Emerson

Suffolk-raised sibling duo Esme and Emerson Lee-Scott's debut single 'Please' is a beautifully simple indie-folk song that concerns knotty queer love but feels completely at ease with itself. Debut EP *Big Leap, No Faith, Small Chancer*, out via Communion Records on 28 June, takes their sound in a poppier direction, mixing the organic feel of their debut single with slicker, Auto-Tuned sounds.

Pem

Pem — aka Bristol-based artist Emily Perry — wrote her debut EP *Cloud Work* after the death of her father. Over sparse instrumentation, Perry works through the feelings with openness and vulnerability, led by her unusual and alluring voice. "The process of creating *Cloud Work* enabled me to find beauty, meaning and comfort in a very difficult time," she said, and these realisations burst out on a special first release.

Slate

On their debut pair of singles, Welsh four-piece Slate told twisted stories of their homeland. Previewing debut EP *Deathless* — out on 17 May via Brace Yourself Records — is new single 'Remoter Heaven', a mighty seven-and-a-half-minute monster that shows the depth of their ambition. It's all led by vocalist Jack Shephard, whose sound is more akin to Britpop belters than sardonic post-punk. It's Slate's vital twist on a still-potent formula.

Sarah Julia

Amsterdam-based sisters Sarah and Julia Nauta have been singing together since childhood, and it's immediately apparent in their music. The pair's delectable harmonies intertwine with each other effortlessly on debut EP, *How Do We Go Back to Being Normal?*. The most apparent comparison is to First Aid Kit — maybe it's a type of musical chemistry only siblings can reach?

Dan Aura

Dan Aura's powerful pop is rooted in self-expression, liberation and vibrancy. 'Rich Man' is all about appreciating the small things, while 'Rewritten' is an emotional ode to looking back on failed relationships. Elsewhere, 'Straight Boys' is an LGBTQ+ anthem in the making.

The Itch

The Itch — Georgie Hardy and Simon Tyrie — have developed a well-honed reputation on the live circuit, and their debut single, 'Ursula', which arrived in April, shows they're an equally impressive studio prospect too. Across a seven-minute voyage of volatile noise and chaotic synth-pop, the duo prove they're a force to be reckoned with.

LULU

Afro-Soul star LULU's music is a true balm for the soul. 'Yesterdays' sees the south-east London singer channel her love of Lauryn Hill and Moelogo, as well as more contemporary artists such as Tems, Burna Boy and Teni. Don't bet against her reaching the same dizzy heights.

Lana Lubany

Palestinian-American artist Lana Lubany offers up emotionally drenched pop that draws on heritage and a struggle with belonging. Of recent single 'make it better', she says, "The past few months have been really hard, and being away from my family and my home made it easy to isolate and withdraw into my emotions. But writing 'make it better' has been a healing process."

Elle Darlington

Elle Darlington recently told Rolling Stone UK that Mariah Carey and Ariana Grande are among her heroes. This rising Welsh star has their defiant spirit and — whisper it — belting pipes in spades. It's evident on 'feel it all', a hard-hitting break-up tune laced with an all-important sense of empowerment.

Lip Filler

Lip Filler's sound is a grab bag of 21st-century indie and beyond, with a refreshingly limitless outlook. The five-piece made their name at raucous house shows, and this frenzied nature is also captured on record. What sets them apart is their backgrounds in electronic music, with innovative flourishes that create a catchy and boisterous indie feel. New EP *witchescrew* is being previewed by new single 'Followup', which has echoes of King Krule, Mount Kimbie and The Streets but has a sound that is Lip Filler's own.

ESME EMERSON: NICK ILLOT AND LYDIA COOPER. ELLE DARLINGTON: SOPHIE HOLDEN; SLATE: SAM STEVES @SAM.FFOTO; LIP FILLER: JUDE HARRISON

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MUSIC

Making it up as they go along

Yeti funerals, big-name producers and a fiercely DIY ethic: we meet Mary in the Junkyard, the band making some of the best new rock music in the UK right now

By WILL RICHARDS

STEVE GULLICK

WHEN ENTERING Mary in the Junkyard's headline show at south London's Corsica Studios, Rolling Stone UK is directed towards a side room where a 'yeti funeral' is promised before the main event. True to the brief, the second room of the venue – most often used for club nights – plays host to the wake of a character first introduced in the video for the band's debut single, 'Tuesday'.

"Yeti not forgeti," one fan has written in the guest book, while a specially created score on accordion by the band's vocalist Clari Freeman-Taylor sends foreboding ambient tones through the room as plumes of smoke are pushed out and cover the lifeless creature in the centre.

From the moment they emerged with 'Tuesday' last year, Mary in the Junkyard have been fully committed to this type of immersion across their music, artwork and videos. Everything is created by the band themselves – they even made each other stage outfits for the Corsica gig – and feeds into the same fascinating world.

The music itself feels like the tip of the iceberg, but the trio's early offerings comprise some of the most exciting indie music made in London this decade so far. Led by Freeman-Taylor's alluring, unique vocals, they make noisy and rowdy guitar pop with significant depth and complexity. Through performing what they estimate as between 30 and 40 gigs at the Brixton Windmill across 2023, the band developed a reputation as a formidable live act, which is transferred onto tape brilliantly on debut EP *This Old House*.

A few weeks before the Corsica gig, Rolling Stone UK met the band at a pub just over the road from the Corsica Studios before they headed inside the venue to scope out the room and to put in place perfect plans for the Yeti's final goodbye. The trio – Freeman-Taylor, multi-instrumentalist Saya Barbaglia and drummer David Addison – are effusive and giddy in conversation, overlapping each other's points and hammering home the interconnectedness of their lives both as bandmates and friends.

Freeman-Taylor and Barbaglia met in youth orchestra and spent lockdown in the project Second Thoughts, which – out of necessity – made their fanbase online and relied on a Discord and TikTok-led approach. "What we've done now is a complete reaction to so much music being bedroom-produced," says Barbaglia, rejecting the idea of the album coming first and then aiming to get those internet-based fans out of the house to a live show. "We didn't even really think about recording until we'd played so many shows. We were playing live just to play live."

Through this time period, the band have had the ever-rarer opportunity to cycle through patchy early material away from the baying eyes of the industry or the internet in order to find their sound and their style. "There was a song that lasted about three gigs," Freeman-Taylor laughs. "We've had a lot of duds!"

Barbaglia elaborates, "There was a song called 'Sandwiches'," which the band go on to sing for us in unison: "*I was trying to butter the bread, but my knife slipped / I'm not well enough to make you a sandwich!*

"It was so fun and so outrageous, but it was meaningful at the time," says Barbaglia, before singing the rest of the endearingly charming early track with glee. "I swear one of the times we played it I cried," she laughs.

To translate the word-of-mouth success of their live shows, the band connected with XL Recordings boss Richard Russell, who had invited Freeman-Taylor to his 'seasonal jams', where a handpicked selection of musicians convene at his studio for sessions to mark each seasonal equinox. Russell had discovered the band through a YouTube video of a live performance, and they ended

"We don't really have a plan. It's a case of seeing what happens. We're always going to be a bit scrappy"
— *Barbaglia*

THE POWER OF THREE
(from left) vocalist Clari Freeman-Taylor, drummer David Addison and instrumentalist Saya Barbaglia

up being the first band he has ever produced.

As the majority of Russell's production work is in the electronic sphere, a live room doesn't exist as such in his west London base. To combat this, Mary in the Junkyard set up in his kitchen. The trio are animated as they discuss the smell of burning incense that filled the room, Russell's excellent selection of toilet books and the "little bits of wisdom" he would sprinkle into the sessions despite being a largely hands-off producer. "He was definitely thinking big picture, because the songs were more or less done before we went in," Addison remembers.

With backgrounds in music away from the indie-rock they now make, the trio see the sonic future of Mary in the Junkyard as a blank canvas. "It could go in any direction," says Addison.

Barbaglia adds, "We don't really have a plan. It's a case of seeing what happens. Giving ourselves limitations, we want to see how much we can do within that."

This vision comes into focus at the Corsica show. The gig is defined by a delicate mix of off-the-wall silliness and deeply considered and superbly constructed music. As they play new material with the dexterity of *In Rainbows*-era Radiohead, a papier-mâché mascot named Brian hangs above them. One of his light-up eyes malfunctions two-thirds of the way through the gig, but it adds to the charmingly ramshackle, DIY nature of the whole thing.

"What's important to us as a band is that we're always going to be a bit scrappy," says Addison.

Freeman-Taylor picks up the thread: "We like doing things ourselves. It's not because we have to – it's because we want to. It's important to us to keep that spirit."

TV

Suitors and ties

Bridgerton*'s newest beau Victor Alli on joining the hit Netflix adaptation as the third season begins*

By SYDNEY BOLEN

IN VICTOR Alli, Netflix's *Bridgerton* finally finds its John Stirling, a long-anticipated character from the book series by Julia Quinn. Although the rest of *Bridgerton*'s third season focuses on the events covered in the third novel, *Romancing Mr Bridgerton*, and introduces us to the wider world of the titular family, Stirling comes from the sixth instalment, *When He Was Wicked*. "It was really nerve-wracking," Alli tells Rolling Stone UK, as he discusses joining the show as the love interest of Francesca (played by Hannah Dodd). He also touches on acting without dialogue and the enduring importance of grand gestures.

Welcome to *Bridgerton*! What was it like to join the cast of such an internationally beloved show?

Everyone's so sweet, so kind and so welcoming. It was really nerve-wracking coming in as a new character because I wanted to live up to the standard of the show. But after I met Hannah at the chemistry read and the cast later on, they alleviated some of my stress and fears.

Did it help that Hannah is also new to her role this season?

We kept saying that we felt like the new kids who had to prove ourselves, which is a weird feeling. It was nice to have someone to share it with.

You are playing a much-anticipated character, at least for those who have read the books. However, there isn't a lot of John on the page. What are his defining characteristics for you?

In public, he seems shy, but in private, he has a strong sense of self and isn't afraid to go against the customs and traditions of the ton [the 1800s term for high-society London]. In episode four, he just knocks on the Bridgertons' door without being announced. He is really thoughtful as well. He's always thinking about a lot of different things at once. I find him quite charming in a self-deprecating way. I don't think he takes himself too seriously. In part two, he really comes out of his shell as he gets to know the family. It was really fun to play. My favourite scene is in the second half of the season.

John and Francesca have a very instant and natural kind of love, but it's also very quiet. As an actor, is it harder to play a character if they don't have much dialogue?

At RADA, one of the things that really resonated with me is that despite what people think, acting is more about what you don't say than what you do. There's something quite special about communicating with someone with no words. It was nice doing the quieter scenes and having those moments of silence. It didn't feel awkward at all, you know, even though the script said, "There's a long, awkward pause that's not natural for TV." It may come across that way on screen, but I never felt it because I had an internal monologue going through my head. Every single time we'd do a take, I would change that monologue. It gave me an opportunity to say what I wanted in those times and think about what John would say or what he might be thinking. It was quite nice not saying anything, but also communicating so much. I loved it.

Finally, John is a big believer in a grand gesture. Where do you stand on that concept?

I like a grand gesture. They can convey a variety of different emotions. In my own life, I've done a few grand gestures, and they've always been received quite well. Everyone should make a grand gesture for someone they love at least once in their life.

PHOTOGRAPH BY Pip

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Cosy, classic pop

LAUFEY MAKES MUSIC that bridges generations, offering up lovesick modern-pop lyricism amid sounds that recall Ella Fitzgerald and Chet Baker. Fresh from a Best Traditional Pop Vocal Album win for her second LP, *Bewitched*, at the Grammys — "One of the best moments of my life," she says — the Icelandic Chinese multi-instrumentalist and singer is just getting started. "I have to live to write, it goes hand in hand," says Laufey, 25. She's at her most creative in a warm, comfortable environment: "It's all about having instruments that I connect with. I really need natural light as well, and I love having books around me." The songs she writes this way have rapidly given her a fiercely loyal fan base. "My songs are like my journals," she says. "And when other people relate to the music, I'm like, 'Oh, thank God I'm not alone.'" LEAH LU

Laufey rehearsing in LA in January

MUSIC

Toni Sancho's manifesto of hope

The London-via-Trinidad singer discusses the power of music in helping her move past depression and uplift others

By WILL RICHARDS

MARCO GREY

TONI SANCHO only began to realise what music meant to her when it was taken away. The singer was born in London before moving to her mother's native Trinidad aged 10.

During Sancho's time in the Caribbean, her mother gifted her a range of musical instruments, but it was the ukulele that stuck. When the pair flew back to London when Sancho was 21, her instrument was seized at the airport and left behind. "I didn't realise how upset I'd be," she says now. "I needed it." Soon after they returned to the capital, Sancho's mother bought her a replacement ukulele, and the rest is history.

During the few years prior to their move, Sancho had been writing songs as a way to make sense of – and to try to move past – a debilitating depression. "What I'm realising now with getting older is that it's very spiritually healing to be able to process that and have the mirror reflecting these extreme feelings of misery and shame," she says.

These experiences are laid out on debut EP *Heaven Knows!*, due out on 31 May via her own Blue Daisy Records. It's an impressively naked and honest collection of musings on this darkness, transmitted via Sancho's honeyed vocals and juxtaposed with buoyant and uplifting music. Each track, as well as the EP's title, ends with an exclamation mark, as if she's physically willing herself through the hard times. Her Zoom handle – Toni! – does the same.

In releasing the debut EP, Sancho says she is "releasing this darkness" and moving into another phase of her life. "In not being able to release these songs, I have felt tied to the hip to my old self," says Sancho, and by sharing them with the wider world she can shed that skin. "They were mantras to me, and would lift me out of whatever I was going through," she says of the songs, which explains their singular and personal feel. "There's this rock bottom you hit, where you're like, 'Fuck it,'" she recalls. "Either I fuck off and just die, or I keep going. [These songs] represented what I was going to do when I kept going. It's not caring about what anyone else is going to say. Just: 'What does Toni want to say right now?'"

What Toni wanted to say, it turns out, was to turn personal despair into a manifesto for the whole world. The EP's lead single and best track, 'Free Falling!', tries to find what's important in life by zooming out and considering our place in the entire universe. "For me, the way out of my darkness was through this purpose of music."

Away from its lyrics, Sancho's music is imbued with the rhythms and cultures of Trinidad as well as London. "We are so much more than just Soca," she says. "There is an innate rhythm and feeling to us that can be communicated in music. I love the idea of opening up what Trinidadian music is."

"The worst and darkest parts of my life were in fact the parts that produced the most fruit, the most healing, the most purpose"

To do this, Sancho has launched the label and collective Blue Daisy, which taps into her past as well as the Caribbean artistic community in London – she has referred to it as "a Trinbagonian Creative Movement". Its logo – flowers drooping in the rain – is about how "the worst and darkest parts of my life were in fact the parts that produced the most fruit, the most healing, the most purpose."

Through the label and collective, Sancho wants to teach artists how to use social media in a way that enhances their art and the experience of the listener, rather than diminishes it. It's the next step for an artist who has turned personal turmoil into a life-changing manifesto, emerging in the process as a special new voice. ®

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MUSIC

The highs and lows of Girl in Red

The super-relatable pop singer from Norway is ready for her close-up after touring with Taylor

By BRENNA EHRLICH

MARIE ULVEN is not a chill person. Over the course of lunch at a slick New York spot packed with women in expensive-looking black athleisure, she swings between aping Taylor Swift's arm flex on 'The Man' from the Eras tour – a move that Ulven, who opened for a few of those dates last summer, knows all about – and clutching her chest, breathless. "I'm just trying to deal with my anxiety when it comes," she says. "Right now, my heart really hurts."

Ulven's not having a heart attack, thank God. Sometimes, the Norwegian artist known as Girl in Red can just get a little overwhelmed. And with good reason. Today, no one at this swish eatery recognises the young woman in the blue Ralph Lauren sweater and LA Dodgers cap, but with a Swift stadium tour under her belt and a new record, *I'm Doing It Again Baby!*, in the offing, that could very well be about to change. As her creative director and longtime friend Isak Jenssen tells me: "She switches between being the most confident person I know to being very insecure. At one point, she didn't think she had the biggest potential, like Taylor or Billie. But now, I think, she realises she does."

Ulven, 25, has pretty much always taken music seriously – she's a true workhorse, like those superstars. The Oslo resident started writing songs when she was eight, playing guitar at 14, and has been producing her own music for a decade. After uploading her first song, the sad-and-sweet 'I Wanna Be Your Girlfriend', to YouTube in 2018, things started moving very fast for the then-teen. She dropped two EPs in 2018 and 2019, followed by her debut album, *If I Could Make It Go Quiet*, in 2021. A poppy therapy session of a record that dealt with everything from macabre intrusive thoughts to the indignity of being a fuck buddy, the LP cemented Ulven's place in a weird-girl pop canon that includes the likes of Olivia Rodrigo and Gayle. She's relatable, but not cliché.

If three years seems a bit of a long time between albums for a budding artist, Ulven not only agrees with you, she's already worried about everything else she hasn't done yet: headlining her own arena tours, buying a mid-century pied-à-terre in Los Angeles, and, oh God, turning 30. "I need to learn to smell the fucking roses," she says, debating whether to just eat her Caesar salad with her hands – the giant leaves are unwieldy – or use a fork. Opting for the former, she adds: "I saw this TikTok about how we're the only species on the planet, humans, that are never satisfied. We set a goal and we really chase that fucking goal. And then we achieve it, and then we're like, 'What's next? What's next?' There's something really depressing about it."

In the end, Ulven went back to the studio when she was ready – when she had her fill of experiences to translate into music. "I'm inspired by paper and folders and fonts and light," she says, crunching into a crouton. "I'm inspired by espressos and travelling and trains. I'm inspired by waiters having etiquette. How he pours wine very nicely and lets you smell it first. I'm inspired by absolutely everything."

One big inspiration these days is her girlfriend, whom Ulven met at an Oslo bar in 2021 after deciding to just say yes to life instead of hiding on her couch. The night they met went on and on, Ulven says, culminating at the beach where they hung out under the stars with her dog. "Prior to meeting my girlfriend, I was very much convinced that I was unlovable, and I really hated myself," she says. "I never realised that it actually can really tear you down to be hating yourself so much." That experience is immortalised on her new album with the swoony 'A Night to Remember', studded with lush keys that flutter like your heart does when you start falling in love.

As per usual, Ulven plays nearly every

PHOTOGRAPHY BY Thea Traff

GROOMING BY MELISSA DEZARATE AT A-FRAME AGENCY USING KEVIN MURPHY AND DR. STURM; STYLING BY LUCY GASTON; OPPOSITE PAGE: OUTFIT BY CELINE BY HEDI SLIMANE. JEANS BY ACNE STUDIOS; THIS PAGE: JACKET BY SAINT LAURENT BY ANTHONY VACCARELLO. SHIRT BY ACNE STUDIOS; PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY LIZIE BEN SHMUEL; STYLING ASSISTANCE BY NICHOLSON BAIRD

"I'm inspired by paper and folders and fonts and light. I'm inspired by espressos and travelling and trains... I'm inspired by absolutely everything"

instrument on the album, which she recorded across a handful of European studios and her Oslo apartment. But this time, her signature brand of bedroom pop is polished to a high gloss that she's only slightly worried fans will find off-putting. "I feel like I'm a completely different person," she says. "So the music on this album, for me, doesn't sound so different from what I've done before. It just sounds like exactly what I'd make right now."

In her classic fashion, the album ping-pongs between highs and lows. Opener 'I'm Back' creeps in almost bashfully, with Ulven proclaiming: "*I'm back, I feel like myself / I was gone for a minute 'cause I went to get help*." The switch flips with 'Doing It Again Baby', a bombastic strut of a song, and the first one she wrote for the record after compulsively picking out the melody during soundchecks. "That song is about feeling like I have so much self-esteem that I feel like I'm a cocky-ass bitch walking down the streets with my sunglasses on," she says.

Still, the bravado isn't a constant – single 'Too Much' is about being just that (her mom was always telling her to quieten down), while tracks like 'Phantom Pain' and 'Pick Me' remind us that Ulven wasn't always so lucky in love. Sabrina Carpenter does help her go scorched-earth on an ex, though, on 'You Need Me Now'. The two singers both gained big new audiences last year as openers on separate legs of Swift's Eras tour, but they've been friends since around 2022 – Ulven says they formed a mutual-appreciation society in each other's DMs before she asked Carpenter to guest on the dark rocker of a track for her new album.

"When she reached out to me, it felt like a no-brainer and I was immediately drawn to the record," Carpenter says. "It was exciting to make because it pushed me into new sonic territory."

Ulven is perhaps most herself on the ominous, echoey 'Ugly Side', in which she grapples with feeling like Jeykll and Hyde – torn between being "*cute*" and "*lovable*" and "*boiling inside*".

In a lot of ways, she's always existing between dichotomies, whether that means feeling distinctly uncomfortable attending New York Fashion Week shows by hip designers like Tory Burch, Khaite, and Eckhaus Latta while she's in town ("I'm a very basic girl when it comes to clothes," she says) or proclaiming on her album's title track: "*My big fat ego is making me say / This '99 vintage has impeccable taste*!"

"I have these incredible highs, and then I have these very low lows," Ulven says as the waiter whisks away our plates. "Maybe that's good. I don't want to be just one thing. I don't want to be just this confident person who never doubts themselves. I think doubt can be great as much as it can be very paralysing."

She pauses for a moment. "Yeah. I just need to chill the fuck out. I think that's exactly what I need to do." There's a first time for everything.

FAST FACTS

SWIFT THINKING
On the Eras tour, Ulven says, she and Taylor Swift chatted about the challenges of making a second album and writing from perspectives other than your own.

ART POP
The cover of her new album is a massive sculpture that she commissioned in Oslo.

YES, CHEF
She's a big fan of *The Bear* and star Jeremy Allen White.

Q&A

Omar Apollo

On befriending SZA, jamming out to Beyoncé, and making music for arenas

By TOMÁS MIER

OMAR APOLLO IS looking at himself through Zoom as he tries on the beige Sherpa jacket he just bought. "You fuck with it?" he asks.

It's hard not to fuck with everything the Mexican American alt-R&B star does. Apollo dropped his debut album, *Ivory*, in April 2022, blew up with its ultra-sentimental song 'Evergreen', and followed that success by touring with SZA last year. Recently, he's been dipping into fashion. (A massive billboard of him dripped in the luxury designer Loewe looms over LA's Sunset Boulevard.)

Apollo is back in LA these days, putting the finishing touches on his upcoming album, out in the summer. He's experimenting with jazz, house and other genres, and he tells me it's the best music he's ever made. And, nah, he's not just saying that.

How are you?
I'm good. I've been posted up, finishing the album. We're mixing, and I'm really excited. How are you?
Good. I just got back from visiting family in Durango, Mexico.
Duranguense! I know the dance. You're supposed to act like you got a penny stuck in between your cheeks or something.
Your knees.
Oh, your knees? I remember my mom would teach me how to do that. I was in *baile folklórico* when I was younger. It was zapateado and dances like that. The girls had the little clicks in their hands and the big dresses. The guys would have sombreros and mariachi-looking pants.
How are you feeling about this new album? I read that you are angrier on it.
Angrier, definitely, on the single 'Spite'. Now it's back to my old longing-for-love vibe, but it's reimagined. I got in with Teo Halm. He's been my friend since I was 17 years old. We met when I worked at Guitar Center. We reconnected on 'Evergreen'. We flew to London for two or three months last year. It was really no breaks. It was cool to get into that state of mind where everything is about making music we both love and connect to. The album doesn't feel like it's a bunch of songs put together. It's a sequence that is made to be listened to front to back.
There's one house-infused song that feels like it came from left field.
I was trying to paint an image. I want to be able to set a scene the way that a film would. I wanted something people could just be at the club with, because when you think of my music, you don't think about the club. So I'm like, 'Fuck, I need some club shit.' But it was just how I was feeling at the time, in London especially. I was going to so many parties.
Who were some of your inspirations on here?
It was, like, Kate Bush, Giorgio Moroder, Labi Siffre. Let me pull out the playlist: Daniel Johnston, he's sick. Jeff Buckley, Lana Del Rey, for sure. I've also been listening to a lot of Beyoncé.
Which album?
4. That album's insane.
You have your Disha Hot sauce going to Taco Bell.
My mom made the hot sauce recipe. I wanted to do a relaunch of my hot sauce, but I had to make *Ivory*. I was like, 'Fuck, I have to put this aside for now and focus on the music.' The hot sauce packets will be in every Taco Bell in America. It feels good because she crossed the border from Mexico and opened up a restaurant. When I was born, it became too much, so she had to shut it down. This was the hot sauce she used in the restaurant, so it's me being like, "Since I made you get the restaurant shut down by being born, this is how I'm paying you back."
What kind of food would your mom make?
She would make tortas ahogadas, chiles rellenos, aguachile. She made a lot of shit. She was so good at it, I'm not going to lie. That just made my mouth water.
The first time we spoke was two years ago, before the success of 'Evergreen'. How are you handling the fame that came at you pretty quickly?
It was weird at first. The things I'd say on the internet would come up in interviews. I'd be like, 'Damn, people remember that? That was a tiny thought that I had.' By the time 'Evergreen' blew up, I already had the infrastructure that I needed to maintain, so it wasn't like, 'Oh, what do we do now?' I had already done eight world tours. I was selling out venues, but it reached a way different level.
In LA you went from the Shrine to opening for SZA at the Forum.
When I played the Shrine, which was, like, 5,000 people, 'Evergreen' hadn't blown up yet, so I was like, 'Damn, I feel successful.' After that show, I remember feeling like, 'I want to triple this.' And then the SZA tour happened, and I was like, 'Fuck.' I had to focus because that was an entire crowd of people who just didn't know me. It was scary. After the arena tour, that's when I figured out how I wanted to make music. I was like, 'Oh, I want to make music for arenas.'
Did you develop a friendship with SZA on tour?
Yeah, I did. On the road, it was super busy, but she's super sweet. We were at dinner a couple of months ago, and then I saw her at the Drake show. I was so drunk [*laughs*]. She's always showing love.

PHOTOGRAPH BY Joshua White

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CULTURE

Sounds of Blackness

Celebrating Black music history at British Library show, Beyond the Bassline

BRITISH LIBRARY EXHIBITION Beyond the Bassline traces 500 years of Black British music and the pioneers whose influence can still be felt today. Curated by Dr Aleema Gray in collaboration with Dr Mykaell Riley, Beyond the Bassline – and its accompanying book of the same name – is a roadmap through the history of Black British music. Focused on the people, places and communities that have defined 500 years of Black music and community resistance in this country, the exhibition runs until 26 August and the book is available now. The first series of its kind in the world, it will tell stories old and new of the profound impact Black communities and artists have had on the world-renowned music of the UK.

◀ TIME FOR CARNIVAL
After its 1966 launch, the Notting Hill Carnival expanded to incorporate live music, sound systems and costume bands. Despite riots and struggles with police, it became a staple of the London summer.

▲ PARTIES THAT CHANGED THE WORLD
The Notting Hill Carnival has become a world-famous celebration of Black culture in west London every summer, and the *Beyond the Bassline* book recounts the run-up to the first Carnival in 1966 and its troubled but triumphant history, as well as the legendary St Pauls Carnival in Bristol (pictured above).

◀ A FORGOTTEN PIONEER
As well as modern musical heroes, *Beyond the Bassline* tells the story of forgotten Black pioneers written out of history. One of these is Billy Waters (pictured left), a pivotal figure in bringing African sounds to London in the early 19th century.

THIS PAGE: (CLOCKWISE FROM CENTRE) THE WALL POSSE: EVERYONE GETTING THE BEST SEAT FOR THE WILD BUNCH SET, ST. PAULS CARNIVAL, BRISTOL, 1986. PHOTO ® @BEEZERPHOTOS; BILLY WATERS (C. 1778–1823) ILLUSTRATION FROM 'COSTUME OF THE LOWER ORDERS OF LONDON'. BY T. L. BUSBY. LONDON: BALDWIN & CO., 1820. BRITISH LIBRARY, 7742.E.19 (2); BRITISH LIBRARY, MIKE BRAYBROOK ARCHIVE, DEPOSIT MS 10962

◀ COMMUNITY AND ACTIVISM

A wave of new Black British reggae bands formed in the late 1970s were also at the forefront of the UK's anti-racism movement, with huge events held in parks across the country and a generation of musicians coming together to fight injustice. (Pictured: Aswad in Brixton, 1981)

▶ LET IT SPIN

Vital in the sharing of Black music and sounds around the UK was the record shop, and these cultural hubs served as a meeting place for a community bound by music and exploration.

▼ LOVERS' ROCK

In the 1970s and 80s, the reggae sub-genre of lovers' rock took the UK charts by storm, providing the soundtrack for a generation of immigrants. Taking inspiration from the music of Jamaica, it sounded brilliantly, defiantly British. Mixing modern R&B with traditional reggae and imbued with a romantic feel, it was another fresh wave of innovation.

THIS PAGE: (FROM TOP) ASWAD, BRIXTON 1981. PHOTO © ADRIAN BOOT/URBANIMAGE.TV; WOMAN IN A LONDON RECORD SHOP, 1983. PHOTO © RICHARD SAUNDERS/URBANIMAGES.TV

PROFILE

How Hannah Einbinder *Hacks* it in the comedy world

She grew up with a* Saturday Night Live *great, but the actress doesn't take her recent success for granted

By KASE WICKMAN

SANDY HONIG

YOU WOULD BE FORGIVEN FOR mistaking Hannah Einbinder for Ava Daniels, the character she plays on HBO's *Hacks*. The actor shares certain similarities with the comedy writer she's portrayed for two seasons now, like their dry delivery, which leaves you less than 100 per cent sure of whether they're fucking with you until they crack a smirk and let you in on the joke. That's not all, though.

"We're both the same age, and we have the same face and body, of course," Einbinder shares. "She looks exactly like me. That's some *Inside the Actors Studio* stuff, a look behind the curtain."

See also: dry delivery.

But really, Einbinder, 28, found widespread recognition (including twin Outstanding Supporting Actress Emmy nominations) in her mid-twenties with *Hacks*, the same age that Ava is while finding her groove as a writing partner to comedian Deborah Vance (played by Jean Smart, who has her own pair of Best Actress statues for the show), an elder stateswoman of comedy struggling to stay both relevant and creatively fulfilled in the time of TikTok. Einbinder has her own comedic legacy influence in her life: her mother, Laraine Newman, was part of the original cast of a little-known variety show called *Saturday Night Live* in 1975.

Yes, Ava walks and talks like Einbinder, with the actor saying that "as time has gone on, I've imbued her with my affect," but "there are just as many fundamental differences" between them. For one thing, Ava is a Virgo. Einbinder? "Classic Gemini."

Season three of *Hacks* continues the ongoing rom-com (no happily ever after guaranteed) between Ava and Deborah. They say that if you really love something, you should set it free, which is exactly what Deborah was going for when she fired Ava in the season two finale after the pair pulled off a coup with Deborah's self-financed stand-up comeback special.

"She knows Deborah is running away from stability," Einbinder says. "Pushing Ava away because she's scared."

A year later in the show's timeline, Ava and Deborah are estranged. They're professionally successful, if a little bored, and Ava is playing house with her girlfriend, preoccupied with the minutiae of TripAdvisor ratings for a vacation she wants to go on while the show she writes for is on hiatus; and Deborah can't be bothered to show up for the unveiling of a slot machine with her face on it. Things are… fine.

"My mom was a drug addict and on her own in the world. She didn't have a solid support system"

"Of course that only lasts so long, and Ava blows it up to return to Deborah," Einbinder says, arid. Part of that blowing up of Ava's life also leads to whatever was going on in those set photos of Einbinder getting hot and heavy with guest star Christina Hendricks, which set the internet ablaze. Einbinder declined to share many spoilery details, but she says she's looking forward to the audience's reaction to that episode. Things get so steamy that perhaps it'll get… sweaty?

"Things on *Hacks*, when it comes to the hot and heavy, it's only hot and heavy for so long, and then the comedy slides in," she says. "The scene is explosive, of course, on that level, but also it's really fucking funny and so outrageous and insane."

Though she's the daughter of a comedy great, who will be portrayed in the upcoming movie *SNL 1975* by Emily Fairn, Einbinder says she's most benefited from her mom's hindsight. Newman was 23 when *SNL* premiered, not too far off from Einbinder's age when she snagged the co-lead in *Hacks*. However, "my mom was a drug addict and kind of on her own in the world" when *SNL* came a-calling. "She didn't really have a solid support system, and *SNL* is a famously chaotic place," Einbinder says. "So I have certainly benefited from her sober wisdom about those early days.

"At one point, I asked her if she thought I could do it," Einbinder says of following in her mom's footsteps. "And she said, 'Nothing is guaranteed. I think you're funny, but that doesn't always yield results.' She never really blew smoke about the reality of this."

And that message, as we watch Einbinder, as Ava, stumble and recover, is never more clear than in *Hacks*. ®

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WHO'S NEXT

The new Doctor Who is in!

How Ncuti Gatwa went from TV queer idol to making history on the iconic sci-fi show

By ALAN SEPINWALL

THE FIRST THING you notice about Ncuti Gatwa is his smile. Whether as a young, anxious queer teen in Netflix's *Sex Education*, one of the many Kens in *Barbie*, the latest actor to play the lead character in *Doctor Who* – or even on a slightly pixelated Zoom screen – when Gatwa flashes those pearly whites, it is impossible to look at anything else. His expression radiates joy so pure and uncut it's as much a superpower as the Doctor's ability to travel through time.

It's also exactly what *Doctor Who* producer Russell T. Davies was looking for when he began creating this 15th Doctor, long before Gatwa came in to audition. Upon taking the reins of the show again last year, Davies decided that the present moment called for a different kind of Doctor.

"I was thinking about what a terrible world it is now, and how many stresses of mental health there are in young people," says Davies. "I wanted a hero who wasn't closed, who wasn't all stiff upper lip. And [who] wasn't swaggering or butch, either. The life of a young person is bigger and madder and wilder than it was when I was young. So I wanted a hero who *felt* more. Then along comes Ncuti, and bless you, you could not hide your emotions for a second in your performances."

The emotions of Gatwa's Doctor are indeed always palpable. His first appearance, in the Christmas 2023 special, begins with his Doctor crying in a tight close-up; when his new companion Ruby Sunday (Millie Gibson) sees him for the first time, he is exuberantly dancing in a club, wearing a tight tank top and kilt. The delight Gatwa projects

PHOTOGRAPH BY **William Arcand**

The new Doctor, inside the TARDIS

JAMES PARDON/BAD WOLF/BBC STUDIOS

onscreen is also a reflection of how it feels to take on a character who may be second only to James Bond in British pop-cultural identity.

"They are a character that we've grown up knowing and that most people in this country have had the show passed down to from someone," says Gatwa. "It feels really cool."

It's a huge leap in visibility for Gatwa, 31, whose family moved to Scotland when he was two to escape the Rwandan genocide. Growing up, he struggled with racism and loneliness. He almost quit acting due to a lack of money, but then he landed his breakthrough role on *Sex Education*, in which his character Eric Effiong's journey towards embracing his sexuality and finding a place within both his religious family and his church instantly made him an icon for queer teens.

Though *Doctor Who* debuted back in 1963, Disney+ is presenting Gatwa's inaugural series of adventures (which premiered on 10 May) as season one, akin to the periodic fresh starts the franchise has taken. Perhaps the freshest start of all is that Gatwa is the first Black actor to play the Doctor, which will be a big change for legacy viewers – though not necessarily for children in the series' target demographic.

"If you're a six-year-old boy sitting there in Brixton, it's like, '*That's* the Doctor,'" argues Davies. "If they go online, they're finding the spiciest chicken wing on YouTube. They're not bothered by this."

"The show evolves and regenerates. For all you damners out there, I'm not going anywhere"

Still, Davies understands the necessity of hiring an actor of colour to play this iconic role. "It's about time," he says. "Sometimes, big old terrestrial and streaming shows can be slow machines to catch up with the world."

"That's what the show does," agrees Gatwa. "It evolves and it regenerates. I feel like it's about time, and I am here. For all you damners out there, I'm not going anywhere."

Gatwa is also openly queer. So is Davies, who has spent much of his career telling LGBTQ+ stories like *Queer as Folk*. He says *Doctor Who* auditioned performers of every race, gender identity, and sexual identity before Gatwa was chosen, and that this feels less momentous to him and his new star than it may to viewers.

"I don't walk around thinking all day about being queer, and what's my queer energy today," says Davies. "You're talking to people who live a queer life. So this is completely normal. And where I'm slightly amazed is that anyone finds this different."

"I am reluctant to apply any human label to the Doctor," says Gatwa, "because they're an alien. They've been with all sorts. That is label-less and limitless, and I think it represents our ability to be anything. That character can be anyone and played by anyone. And I feel very, very honoured that I get to be the first of a couple of things. If you're a true fan of the show, you understand that the show lends itself to inclusivity and to diversity and welcoming different people in. That's what Russell has done. I'm very happy to be a part of that vision."

Doctor Who has always been socially progressive, but the commentary this time around seems more pointed than Davies' last stint. A recent special gave beloved *Doctor Who* character Donna Noble a nonbinary child, whom she fiercely defended against transphobes, while the season one premiere functions as a metaphor for governments that try to control reproductive rights without worrying about what happens to children after they're born.

"If you're not writing that [in 2024], what on Earth are you doing?" argues Davies. "I think our rights are in danger. So there's no choice in this. There's things to be done, there's things to be said. And if the most exciting and entertaining action-adventure show on television can also do that, I think that's wonderful."

Into this fragile moment steps Gatwa, who was 12 when the first Davies revival began. "It just felt so cool that this was a show that we had on British TV and it was fantastical, and that we had this mad adventure once a week," he recalls. Tennant was the Doctor he grew up on, and he credits Tennant's Hamlet for the Royal Shakespeare Company as the reason he studied drama at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland: "That DVD formed my perception of what a true actor is," he says. While sharing scenes with Tennant in one of the specials, he says, "I felt like I was in *Inception*. It was just like a dream in a dream. For me to have generated from my Doctor, who also is the man that inspired me? Then he introduced me to the TARDIS for the first time, and it was like, the universe is doing some great magics here."

Tennant and Jodie Whittaker (the first female Doctor, a milestone that came with its own baggage) both warned him that however big a deal Gatwa thought being the Doctor was, it's much, much bigger.

"[Tennant] prepared me for the intensity of the show," he says, "which I had been downplaying: 'Yes, I understand that it's a huge show, but I don't think it's going to be that big news, really.' And then it bloody well was. I thought, 'Oh, my gosh.'"

Playing an iconic character with a massive fan base comes with a lot of responsibility. Asked about one point of similarity between the Doctor and Eric, he hesitates, before noting that Eric was a child while the Doctor is thousands of years old, then emphatically jokes, "Eric is gone. Just to let everyone know, Eric is gone. He's dead! He's not here anymore. It's all about the Doctor now!"

Davies, older and more PR-savvy, warns him, "The headline for this will now be, 'Eric is dead!'" An unfazed Gatwa flashes one more dazzling smile and replies, "'And the Doctor lives.' Let that be the headline." RS

IN THE BLACK

The Amy Winehouse business is booming

Thirteen years after the retro-soul singer's death, tribute bands, album reissues and a new biopic are keeping her rebel spirit alive

By DAVID BROWNE

As ANTHONY D'AMATO PREPS backstage at Sony Hall in midtown Manhattan, it's hard not to notice his six-foot height, horn-rimmed glasses – and the name "Amy" in large black letters on the side of his head. It's not a tattoo, just black liquid eyeliner easy to wash off, but it suits the occasion. In a few minutes, the New Jerseyan and his 12-piece band will walk onstage, take their places beneath an LED sign lit up with Amy Winehouse's first name and a simulation of her signature beehive, and play her *Back to Black* album from start to finish – and hardly for the first time, either. "I really never imagined that it would become something that I would have done maybe 200 times at this point," says D'Amato, who uses the stage name Remember Jones. "My queer friends, all people of colour, my mom – everybody knew who Amy Winehouse was."

In July 2011, Winehouse was found dead of alcohol poisoning at her home in Camden, London. She left behind a mere two albums (including the 2006 retro-pop classic *Back to Black*) and a chequered personal life plagued by addiction, marriage, divorce and a million paparazzi photos documenting it all. In the years since, her musical and cultural influences have only grown. Lana Del Rey, Adele, Lady Gaga and Future have all cited her as an influence; Miley Cyrus and Måneskin have covered her songs onstage. D'Amato's show is merely one of many tribute acts working around the world, from the US and the UK to Serbia and Slovenia, many featuring Winehouse lookalike singers sporting her trademark hairstyle, winged eyeliner, pumps and miniskirts.

Fans can make a pilgrimage to Camden to see a life-size bronze statue of Winehouse erected in her honour in 2014. (Early this year, to protest against Israel's attacks in Gaza, someone covered the Star of David necklace on the statue with a sticker of a Palestinian flag.) For $135,000, Winehouse die-hards – who call themselves either Winettes or Cherries (after her song 'Cherry') – could even own the nearly 230 books in her personal library. A few years ago, the Washington, D.C., rare-books dealer Type Punch Matrix bought the collection at a charity auction organised by Winehouse's family and is now offering it for sale. The collection includes books on her hero Frank Sinatra, Jackie Collins novels, bios of musicians who battled addiction (Anthony Kiedis, Jimi Hendrix), a copy of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*

GETTY IMAGES/PETER MACDIARMUID; DEAN ROGERS/FOCUS FEATURES

with an unfinished lyric tucked inside, and certain volumes with obvious wear and tear. "It's pretty clear she was reading some of these in the bathtub, or lighting candles in her apartment and these were under them," says Type Punch Matrix co-owner Brian Cassidy. "The condition helps tell the story and speaks to the life." One book sports a lipstick kiss. "I can't prove it's Amy's," Cassidy says, "but I'm pretty sure."

At the same time, the musical-industrial complex around Winehouse has expanded. Her legacy now includes more than a dozen reissues, compilations, live recordings, and documentaries. This year, the reissue of her 2003 debut, *Frank*, will be commemorated with a new edition and video for 'In My Bed'. *Back to Black*, a biopic directed by Sam Taylor-Johnson (who also helmed the John Lennon biopic *Nowhere Boy*) was released in April. During filming, the director herself noticed Winehouse's ubiquity. "You walk into a restaurant, she's singing," Taylor-Johnson says. "You walk around the corner, there's a mural. You walk into a shop, there's a poster. You see people with a T-shirt or a scarf. It feels everywhere all the time."

When Winehouse died, much was made of her age – 27, the same as Kurt Cobain, Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, and others in the so-called "27 Club". At the time, comparisons to those rock legends felt a little premature, but 13 years after her death, they've been proven true. One of the first major pop stars of the millennium, Winehouse is now the equivalent of a Cobain or Morrison for the generation who came of age with pop in this century, and with a fan base and industry to match. "She's in the same breath, not just biographically but artistically," says Cassidy. "There's tragedy there, but also a lot of joy and creativity. There's something very archetypal about her life."

As her former bass player Dale Davis says, "You get these people who come along once a generation and just change everything up completely. So, it doesn't surprise me in the slightest that interest is still there. It's a short career, like Cobain, but the impact is massive, isn't it?"

When trying to pinpoint the moment that the posthumous Winehouse industry kicked into gear, all roads point to *Amy*, director Asif Kapadia's 2015 documentary. The film made $23 million worldwide, an exceptional number for a doc of any sort, and won the Oscar for best documentary. "There was interest right after that," says Sony Music Publishing executive Chris Jones, who oversees the licensing of her songs.

Soon after the film, Davis was approached about reuniting Winehouse's touring band behind an Amy-style frontperson. Originally called Forever Amy and since renamed the Amy Winehouse Band, the UK-based tribute show recreates a standard Winehouse set list. "If we're going to give people the feeling of how it was," Davis says, "I thought it was easier to stick to an original show and have the same format."

Davis, who admits he had concerns about the idea, says he experienced an unsettling moment during one of the group's early shows in 2016, when an Italian singer was performing as Winehouse. "My bass guitar wouldn't stay in tune for the whole night," he says. "At that point, I thought Amy was trying to tell me something." But after seeing emotional fans at shows and hearing from another that their mother was dying – and attended the show so she could have a Winehouse experience before she passed – Davis reconciled with his decision. Save for a period during the pandemic, the Amy Winehouse Band has been working ever since. Davis also says that Amy's father, Mitch Winehouse (who declined to comment for this story), saw a show and gave his blessing: "He found it very emotional."

Both the Winehouse Band and D'Amato's "Back to Back to Black" shows purposefully avoid lead singers who replicate Winehouse's look; the Winehouse Band's current frontperson, Bronte Shande, sports neither beehive nor Amy-style makeup. "I want someone to have the spirit of Amy like Bronte does," Davis says. "I've worked with the original Amy. I don't need to work with someone who looks like her." D'Amato, whose show features both him and several different male and female singers, also has mixed feelings about lookalike acts. "I don't knock it, but some of them are just not great," he says. "The singer can't quite sing it or doesn't pull off the thing. You can't really try to copy Amy."

Not every Winehouse-related project has panned out. A hologram tour, in which Davis and her old band would have accompanied a simulated Winehouse, was announced in 2018 but fell through for reasons that remain unclear. But overall, the business of Winehouse appears to be in healthy shape. According to one industry source, her publishing catalogue is likely valued at nearly 20 times its annual earnings (on the high end of such evaluations). Last year, Openville Ltd, the private company directed by her divorced parents, Mitch and Janis, that oversees that business, had equity of about $2 million. According to Royalty Exchange, which allows investors to buy shares of royalties of select songs, Winehouse's catalogue is "highlighted by consistent, still-growing earnings" and is "above the 75th percentile of all catalogues analysed by Royalty Exchange".

The Winehouse windfall spiked after the release of *Back to Black*, starring British actress Marisa Abela and tracing Winehouse's life from her teen years through her death. During the filming, photos of Abela as Winehouse made their way around the internet, much to the displeasure of some Winehouse fans. "It's a fucking sick joke – Amy would be pissed off at this shit," wrote a fan in a typical sentiment. Davis witnessed the outcry for himself. "I had people who are supposedly friends of mine on my Instagram feed saying, 'Let's make a petition to stop the film,'" he says. "It's so fresh in people's minds, and they have a lot of opinions."

The fervency of Winehouse's fan base may recall that of past rock legends, but it also brings with it a new twist. Her breakthrough coincided with the rise of social media, and the way her life was so publicly on display connected with members of a generation who've lived their lives on social media as well. "Seeing her and some of her struggles, some people identify with it instead of sensationalising it," says D'Amato. "They think, 'She's more like me.'"

After his band's 90-minute show, D'Amato was approached by a fan with a Winehouse tattoo on her arm. "This happens pretty often," he says later. "I always thought I should be taking a photo with the people who show me their tattoos. To put Amy on your skin, it's got to connect to you in a deep way."

I TOLD YOU I WAS TROUBLE Abela as Winehouse in *Back to Black*

"My bass guitar wouldn't stay in tune for the whole night. At that point, I thought Amy was trying to tell me something"
— *Dale Davis*

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Charli XCX
THE ANATOMY OF A (3-D) FEMALE POP STAR

Female pop stars have been lying to us about how they feel, and Charli is here to tell the truth. The insecurity, competitiveness, ambition, pride and intelligence necessary to be a relevant celebrity are plainly on display in her new club album, *brat* — and it's addictive listening

By Hannah Ewens
Photography by Tyrell Hampton
Creative and styling by Joseph Kocharian

PREVIOUS SPREAD

CHARLI WEARS TOP, BODYSUIT AND JEANS BY **KNWLS**, THONG, CHARLI'S OWN

THIS PAGE

CHARLI WEARS DRESS BY **ISSEY MIYAKE**

It was while creating a hedonistic, indulgent club album that Charli XCX started to think about what it would be like to have a baby. The 31-year-old has always been an artist of extremes, a main character thriving on an emotional and creative knife edge. But the timing wasn't about craving novelty, on this occasion. She's now in her thirties and in a happy relationship of equals with The 1975's George Daniel.

An alternative reality, one in which she would be the supporting character, was presented to her when she went to Stockholm to visit her songwriting collaborator Noonie Bao, her first close friend to have a child. "It was crazy seeing her standing in the same clothes she's always worn, but now she has this completely different perspective on life than I do. She's not enforcing that on me; it's just a fact. She's not alive for the same reasons that I am now," reflects Charli. It seemed like Bao understood some mysterious truth, accessible only through motherhood. It made Charli wonder if she'll ever be privy to that secret. Maybe she'll say, "Fuck it, I don't want to conform to centuries of indoctrination." If she does fold and become a mother, will she be fine with it – or will she crave the freedom she once had?

The questions have circulated in her mind: "Am I less of a woman if I don't have a kid? Will I feel like I've missed out on my purpose in life? I know we're not supposed to say that, but it's this biological and social programming. There's a lot of pressure on women to not talk about that stuff super openly, especially not in pop music or in music generally; we're supposed to be sexy and free and fun and wild." But her new album, *brat*, already possessed those qualities, so she made the penultimate track about her feelings on possible motherhood: the sonically sparse soliloquy, 'I think about it all the time'.

For any woman who slides around on the scale of ambivalence about children, the question of whether to have them or not becomes increasingly shrill with every passing birthday or acquaintance's pregnancy announcement on Instagram. If you're as high-powered as a pop star whose last album went to number one in the UK, as well as having a hit – 'Speed Drive' – on the original *Barbie* soundtrack, the most ubiquitous movie phenomenon of the decade, a certain answer would require extra planning and sign-off. "My circumstance involves me making a decision and being like, 'I'm gonna come off my birth control. I'm not gonna tour. I'm going to see what George wants to do, and then we're gonna try for a baby,'" she says, and adds, after searching for what she wants to say, "I feel like a kid; I don't feel like I can make that decision."

And yet the time will come when she will choose, one way or the other. "You *have* to make the decision – because we have a *clock*," she says, with a snort in place of the exasperating phrase "as a woman".

When CHARLI XCX arrived for this interview, striding through her own back door wearing sunglasses, it was approaching night-time. I'd been waiting for her to return from freestyling her way through a label talk for YouTube. Every room in her home is decorated like a Tim Walker photoshoot: chandeliers hang from euphorically high ceilings, coffee-table books and animal-print flourishes are casually positioned, and an artist's easel complete with stick portrait is set up in a corner. The auspicious Hollywood Hills house must have been blessed by the party gods; she purchased it in 2020 from legendary DJ Calvin Harris (who bought it from its previous owner, the Swedish House Mafia DJ, Steve Angello).

Immediately after the property changed hands, so did the narrative around her. For the first decade of Charli's career, her avant-pop was subversive and overshadowed by her mainstream pop contributions on Iggy Azalea's 'Fancy' and Icona Pop's 'I Love It'. But post-pandemic, she metamorphosed from that game-changing artist on the fringes, never quite paid her dues, to the figurehead of a whole sub-genre (hyperpop) and one of the most directly influential sounds in pop. Since Charli doesn't have long to spend with me because she has important plans tonight, she leads the way in a grey suit and hot pink heels straight upstairs to a darkened studio room with candles that appear to have been left burning all day.

Within minutes, she blasts a selection of Y2K EDM-inspired tracks from *brat*, then stops to lean back in her chair delighted, smoke a cigarette and swig a red Coke, like only a woman who thinks she's king of the world would. "This is my best record, for sure! *For sure*!" she says. Give it another song's time, and she is explaining the meaning behind excoriatingly personal Auto-Tuned ballad 'I might say something stupid', about the existential fear she gets as someone who is "famous but not quite" the morning after an industry party.

"It's about: 'What have I fucking said? Did I belong in that situation? Did I amplify elements of my personality because I felt that I couldn't be myself? Who even am I?'" she says offhandedly. "Especially when around monolithic artists, I sometimes feel insecure about my position. I think a lot of artists feel that, but we don't talk about it because we're all supposed to be strong and confident."

Emotional architecture aside, first and foremost, *brat* is a club record. At this point in early February, fans have not yet heard the conceited rager about her own celebrity, 'Von dutch', her *Vroom Vroom* EP counterpart 'Club classics' or the hypnotic bounce of 'B2b' (which she tells me is about someone she briefly dated who was a serial pop-star dater). Sonically, the album is deceptively simple: a few sounds per track build confident spaces that foreground her lyrics. References for this "no clutter" production were her late friend and collaborator SOPHIE's work, and songs like Peaches' 'Fuck the Pain Away'. The album's circularity and returning sounds make it feel pleasingly like a DJ mix with no beginning and no end.

"Club electronic music is what makes me feel most alive. My nightmare is going to see a pop show or, like, a band," Charli says in her Valley girl British accent forged in the cultural fires of being Essex-raised but having spent a decade living in LA. "Which is funny, obviously, because: George. You can put that in; he knows how I feel about it." The music that makes others feel emotional only leaves her cold. Electronic dance music, though: "It's sadness and beauty and stillness – it does something to me almost chemically, I think."

> "Am I less of a woman if I don't have a kid? Will I feel like I've missed out on my purpose in life? I know we're not supposed to say that, but it's this biological and social programming"

Charli worked on a few tracks with Daniel, who she first paired up with musically in 2021 for a collaborative single 'Spinning' with No Rome. Recently, they've been buried away in the room we're in, working on remixes for her upcoming Boiler Room set, the most RSVP'd Boiler Room in history. "We want to impress each other, and we think we're both really good, but I'm actually such a bitch in the studio with George," she laughs. "Because we're obviously so close, you lose everything in terms of the normal studio boundaries." Sometimes that can mean telling her fiancé, a slower-paced perfectionist who typically creates in a band dynamic, to hurry the fuck up. Her hyper-spontaneity has melded successfully with his sure-footed technical abilities. "We flow really well, and he leaves a lot of space for people to breathe and be them and do their process."

CHARLI WEARS DRESS AND BOOTS BY **LOUIS VUITTON**

CHARLI WEARS
JEANS BY **MAISON VALENTINO**

All the crafted metaphors on the radio-friendly pop of concept album *Crash* (2022) are gone, just as those replaced the diaristic real-time frustrations, hopes and dreams of her pandemic album, *how i'm feeling now* (2020). "For me, the pendulum has to swing so drastically for me to feel inspired," she says to explain *brat*, but it applies to her whole ethos. *brat*'s lyrics are like deep meaningful conversations over voice notes: "I really do feel like I'm saying things that I would say in private to friends." She compares this intimate approach to the Pop Writing 101 on *Crash* single, 'Good Ones'. "You would never actually say, 'Me? I let the good ones go!'" she says, swivelled around in her computer chair, slapping her hands down on her legs in jest. "We'd probably be like, 'Oh my God, I'm a fucking mess. I keep falling for fucking idiot guys.'"

Her work to date has often been about relationships, infidelity and fucking idiot guys. Besides 'B2b', one unnamed song that's explicitly about her current relationship, and talismanic lyrical mentions of "George" to cement his presence into her life and career, *brat* is about women. It's about her relationship to women in her life, her feelings about SOPHIE, competitiveness with female artists and her primary relationship with a woman: the connection she has with herself. Its topics feel sharp, reflective and specific, like 'Sympathy is a knife', which explores how she craves for moments of insecurity to be witnessed, only to feel embarrassed when sympathy is extended. In clumsier or more commercial hands, some of these themes could be corny or delivered in therapy speak, I offer. She couldn't agree more: "I think people really believe it when I say something."

When it's time to leave her house, I ask her what she's doing tonight. I imagine she has another keynote speech or a booking to play a billionaire's birthday party. Her face drops. She cringes and says, "I'm getting a facial... I know, I know." I laugh, and she gives a sly grin, avoiding eye contact. "She's just... really good, and I didn't want to cancel it... I'm sorry."

It's the kind of answer you want from someone who calls herself a "cult classic" and had just told me she's not that into "this" part of her job, gesturing between us. After the release of her most accessible pop album and being part of *Barbie*, it would have been a slick and obvious transition for her to become an edgy Dua Lipa for middle America. Instead, she's chosen the path most interesting to her. If Charli XCX doesn't think she's being clever, she'd be bored, and if she could no longer deem herself aggressively cool, she'd have long since retired.

That contradictory cocktail of brashness and ambition and insecurity and vulnerability are central to what makes her such an enduringly – and perhaps, to some, off-puttingly – three-dimensional pop star.

A COUPLE OF WEEKS later, nearly 40,000 East Coast gays were struck down with a case of FOMO. Meanwhile, the 500 New York club kids and LGBTQ+ elite who had won the RSVP lottery, were gathered in a small warehouse for Charli's Boiler Room set. Or, as DJ Ty Bushwick tweeted, the "Bushwick Met gala".

A remix of Endor's 'Pump It Up' plays while *Drag Race*'s mohawked Aquaria stalks around. Two fans in Von Dutch hats headbang at the barrier. Seemingly everyone is vaping indoors and either dressed like a gothier Spike from *Buffy* or undressed like a back-up dancer in a Britney music video. We're all here to witness and embody for ourselves the outer layer of the Charli XCX psychological onion: the alpha rock star, the living composite of every 2000s celebrity DUI photo, the woman who kick-started this album cycle by telling us we're all obsessed with her.

Fittingly, once Charli, her long-time producer A. G. Cook, and George Daniel get behind the decks, the first noise we hear is Charli hitting the sampler to play herself saying "me". Wearing a big blue T-shirt emblazoned with the words "club classics" in all caps, she mixes a couple of hits, unreleased music and Benny Benassi's 'Satisfaction'. While she mixes 'Vroom Vroom', she plays the word "George" on the sampler, looks over her shoulder and catches his eye. They both grin at each other. Later, he gets enthusiastically introduced as "my sexy fucking fiancé".

In the middle of the event, Charli calls the actress, artist and all-round It Girl Julia Fox out from the VIP pit, who proceeds to the platform to sing her debut single, 'Down the Drain'. Fox was on her way to the Boiler Room when Charli asked if she wanted to perform. "I was just so blown away that she would even share such a monumental moment with me. It really goes to show what a girl's girl she is and how she does want to elevate everyone around her," Fox tells me. Their friendship had been developing for a while prior to this, which Fox attributes to how empowering it feels to be around Charli. "She has a calming energy where you feel like you're gonna be OK around her because she's such a boss."

During one of the set's highlights, Charli takes her boots off, gets up on the platform in tights and sunglasses and dances to A. G. Cook's mix of Rihanna's 'Bitch Better Have My Money'. If anyone else did this, it would be a moment of madness, a high-camp breakdown, but executed by someone who has the body of Venus de Milo with better muscle tone and the confidence of a pack of lions, it provides the sort of communal high you wait a whole night out to experience.

> "Club electronic music is what makes me feel most alive. My nightmare is going to see a pop show or, like, a band"

If you looked closely enough, though, at the beginning of the night her hands were shaking as she manoeuvred the knobs and sliders. While she quickly warmed up, it initially seemed as though she was handling it without much enjoyment. "Me and George in particular were so fucking nervous," she tells me later, noting that both of their DJ employment histories are mainly messy parties. "I actually was looking back at some of the footage when we were doing the edit, and I literally look terrified, which doesn't really happen for me when I do live shows, but I haven't DJ'd with eight cameras in front of my face before."

When she was in her early teens, Charli DJ'd at illegal raves in London, accompanied by her parents because she was so young. Later in the mid-2000s, during the *Pop 2* era, A. G. Cook had a studio in Seven Sisters attached to a club. They'd take their freshly made music inside to play to people for immediate live feedback – to her, the Boiler Room set provided a similar thrill. "I love hearing my own music at parties. For me, the best setting is listening to it out and very loud because you're not supposed to hear it in a Starbucks, and you probably never will – unless there's a twink who's the manager."

In the same way that dogs resemble their owners, an artist's fan base says a lot about the artist. Outside in the relentless queue of the Boiler Room after party, the best-dressed glamazons of New York wait in the rain without umbrellas for an hour and a half before being let in. One of Charli's Angels – the name bestowed on her complex, funny and highly opinionated fanbase – gives a long

CHARLI WEARS
TOP BY **CHET LO**

CHARLI WEARS SHIRT BY **GANT**, BIKINI BRIEFS BY **MIU MIU**, SHOES BY **VERSACE**

CHARLI WEARS DRESS
BY **ISSEY MIYAKE**

scream, and another starts to cry elegantly. "This is *not* giving protect the dolls," a trans woman says, buffing her perfect bob. Another hot Angel tries to push through, saying, "I'm Addison Rae". When Addison Rae arrives in an SUV (and is immediately approached by a gay guy who says, "Addison Rae, I *love* your work"), the Angel cocks her head and changes tack: "I'm the mom from *Spy Kids*." Despite dramatic threats to kill themselves, no one has left, and the second people get inside, their faces turn to stone, as though the downpour never happened. "How do I look?" one fan asks another. "Cunty," they reply.

A TRUE POWERHOUSE – someone with force of will, energy and influence – will turn up to an event and change the energy in the room. At the 2024 Billboard Women in Music awards, Charli is on the red carpet explaining that she's about to perform a sensitive new song that might make her cry. A bubbly female interviewer says, "What safer place to do something like that than in a room of women!" and Charli's body masks an internal sigh before replying dryly, "Right, totally, yes. Girl power, I suppose." The two interviewers laugh, completely missing her sarcasm.

After she settles herself on the stage to perform, she admits that her heart is beating fast. The song she's chosen is 'So I', a heavily Auto-Tuned balladic celebration of SOPHIE, who died in 2021 in a tragic accident. It's laced with Charli's lament at lacking the maturity or self-security to embrace the closeness that the late producer was extending ("*Your words, brutal, loving, truthful / I was petrified*"). Given that the night was about celebrating female artists, Charli tells me, "It felt really right to honour SOPHIE in that space as an incredible trans artist but also an incredible visionary person, period."

When she collects her Powerhouse award, she seems emotionally off-kilter. Instead of telling the female audience about how legendary the women in the room are tonight and the degree to which women rule the entertainment industry, she talks about the "headfuck" of being a woman and a woman in music. Addressing them, she says that women can be jealous, and measure and pit themselves against each other. They want to be hotter or more successful or more *something*, like another woman.

Charli's friend, the actor and comedian Jordan Firstman – who also lives in LA, which he calls "the land of opportunistic fucking assholes and Charli just isn't one of them" – cites her honesty as the quality that still surprises him in their relationship. "I find it so, so refreshing in a friend when they can be real about their insecurities," he says. "If she's feeling bad about where she's at or jealous of someone, she is not afraid to say it, where so many people put up this front that they have never felt insecure or jealous a day of their life, they're just in their own lane. No one actually feels that way."

While she appreciated how special it was to perform 'So I', Charli had to speak her mind at the event. "I *can't* with the lack of reality in situations like that because we're all smart. Women don't have to play the lowest common denominator morally safe card to continue to be smart and liked – you *can* be honest." The truth, she believes, is that jealousy and insecurity are present even, and perhaps especially, at events like that. "Being jealous is somehow wrongly equated to not supporting women or not being a girl's girl, which isn't true. You can, I think, experience envy and still be a good person who champions other women," she says, adding, "Jealousy is just not a very sexy feeling, or a sexy characteristic really, is it?"

"Being jealous is somehow wrongly equated to not supporting women or not being a girl's girl, which isn't true. You can experience envy and still be a good person who champions other women"

To Charli, jealousy is simply about survival of the fittest, and that animalistic urge to thrive is necessary in an industry that values newness, women's youth and palatability. "If you were just chill and happy, you probably wouldn't be working in this industry at the level that I am, you know? There's a competitive nature to this industry, and I think you have to choose how to harness it, or not."

It's that attitude that has typically shown her uplevel in some way on every album or project. When Firstman met Charli at one of his "naughty but not immoral" pandemic house parties, he told her, "Charli, you're the Rick Rubin of your generation – the way you spot other talent and work with every single influential person and bring the vision to life. But I don't know if you're a pop star, girl, sorry." According to Firstman, Charli nodded along politely (naturally, he was

bedridden with Charli-level fear the morning after). Watching her perform on the *Crash* tour, with her new dancing abilities and first-ever embrace of pop choreography, he realised she could go as far as she wants to: "That willpower can do anything."

If she had to name a female artist she has been most jealous of, fans would be amused to hear that it's Lorde. There's a longstanding joke within the standom where fans call Charli Lorde or ask her to play 'Royals' at shows. This began after an interviewer mistook her for Lorde and told her one of her favourite songs was 'Royals'. (In the moment, of course, Charli played along and pretended she was the singer.)

"When 'Royals' came out, I was super jealous of the success that that song got, and that Ella got. You piece all this stuff together in your brain, like: 'She was into my music. She had big hair; I had big hair. She wore black lipstick; I once wore black lipstick.' You create these parallels and think, 'Well, that could have been me.' But it couldn't have because we're completely different people. I wasn't making music that sounded anything like 'Royals'. I think you just read what you want into it because you're feeling insecure about your own work." The envy didn't last forever, and Charli flags that her and Lorde are on good terms. "You get over it and then you try to figure out all the things that are unique about you and you pursue that, and then probably in five months' time you have a breakdown about something else," she says. Ultimately, she adds, it is deep until it's not that deep.

IN ANTICIPATION OF the reviews for *Crash,* the night before the album dropped, Charli was photographed heading out for dinner at Mayfair's Sexy Fish in a Praying crop top that said, "They don't build statues of critics". Any indifference she might feel towards culture journalists aside, she herself is a critic who happens to work as a pop star. She thinks about being a musician through an almost academic lens and then refines her theories by way of her experiences from within the celebrity machine.

"To have a truly good album campaign that doesn't crumble when you scratch the surface, you have to be interested in theory," she says. That could mean staging a video shot by the public in which she's "caught" driving in LA listening to her own music ('Von dutch'). Or scaling a jumbo jet for its music video. Or posting a TikTok of friends like Firstman and comedian Rachel Sennott reading iconic viral marketing ideas her label "sent" her.

Charli has arrived at some of that theory by analysing how alternative subculture and edgy youth culture operate online. "I wouldn't say I'm deeply invested in edgelord culture, but have I scanned the texts? Sure," she says flatly. She's less interested in the politics of notorious Dimes Square podcast *Red Scare*, for example, but enjoyed an episode that applied highbrow thinking to the lore and music of Lana Del Rey. "Obviously, it depends what kind of artist you are, but I think memorable albums are rooted in deep thought rather than just vibes, which to me is the biggest crime."

When I speak to Charli over a video call in April, she's barefaced in a black hoodie for a lowkey morning. Her only other plans for the day are scanning her sweaty body for the 'Sweat' posters for her joint tour with Troye Sivan and meditating using the Charli XCX method (signing 5,000 of her own CDs). She's been too busy crafting the *brat* campaign to further consider the kids question, but some of her creative female friends have heard 'I think about it all the time' and related to it. "It's really difficult to know what kind of mother I would be, to be honest. But I would hope that if I had a child, I wouldn't approach looking after my child the way I approach my career," she laughs.

Since we last met, someone online tweeted a collection of female pop stars' minimalist new album covers that included *brat*'s artwork and accused art directors of being on strike. Charli tweeted in response: "i think the constant demand for access to women's bodies and faces in our album artwork is misogynistic and boring" [sic]. "I struggle with the fact that art is taken at such face value in this day and age," she says of this and the abundance of stan comments online that accuse the *brat* artwork of being lazy or under-delivering. "More often than not, people will just digest the thing that's in front of them and not ask questions. That makes me quite depressed because part of the fun of pop music and especially pop campaigns is figuring it all out."

The *brat* artwork in all its low-res, four-letter word anti-glory, is, of course, intentionally bratty. "I'm not trying to give you something pretty, I'm trying to make you think," she says, speeding through her response. "I'm trying to make you look at yourself and wonder why it bothers you so much that my face isn't on the cover? What does that say about pop culture that that is so bothersome to you? What does that say about what you expect from your artists? What does that say about me as an artist? Does it make me stupid to do that? Does it make me brave to do that? Does it make me lazy to do that?

"There are so many conversations that my album cover opens up, and in my opinion they're more interesting conversations than, 'Oh my God, look how hot she looks,'" she says, fatigued. "It's a fine art conversation really."

> "Brattiness is a cloak. You're only a brat if you're acting out against something that's made you feel a little bit insecure"

The album title is about more than just calling herself a brat, though she certainly is doing that. *brat* embodies the speed with which life on the internet is now lived through its unhesitating trend cycles and forms of gossipy, short-hand communication. Simultaneously, it's a commentary on it. Its meta quality has meant that 'Von dutch', with its lyric "*Do that little dance, without it, you'd be nameless*," unironically became a favourite soundtrack for TikTok influencers and users' bratty little dances.

This online world is the hyperactive throwaway space in which Charli has observed that brats are thriving. "It's about this sort of behaviour that everybody adopts on the internet, whether you're a Twitter troll or whether you're dancing to Addison Rae on TikTok. There is this element of unabashed, shameless, Me-centric content that is being made, but I also think behind that is a lot of people who use that as a protective layer," she explains. "Brattiness is a cloak. You're only a brat if you're acting out against something that's made you feel a little bit insecure."

It takes a brat to know a brat, and it's this theory that explains the unsettling and galvanising energy that's always underpinned the Charli XCX project. Everything that goes into her sexy, dissociative persona only makes her feel more like a fully formed human, more like us. If only everyone understood her centralising rule about pop music: that its stars should be responsible enough to put more than just "cool vibes" out into the world. "That's bad artistry to me," she says, and adds with a sense of finality, "I just don't think about my music or my artistry in a two-dimensional way – and I never will." RS

HAIR BY JILLIAN HALOUSKA AT THE WALL GROUP; MAKEUP BY LAUREN REYNOLDS AT BRYANT ARTISTS; FASHION ASSISTANT: AARON PANDHER

CHARLI WEARS SHIRT BY **GANT**, BIKINI BRIEFS BY **MIU MIU**, SHOES BY **VERSACE**

TRU TO HIMSELF

Born and raised in Manchester, rapper Meekz talks to Rolling Stone UK about why his roots mean so much, his new mixtape *TRU*, and the prospect of removing his mask

BY EMMANUEL ONAPA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY COURTNEY PAUL

Meekz

In a triumphant comeback moment in early April, rapper Meekz orchestrated a surprise Robin Hood-like performance through a community giveback to his fervent following in his home city of Manchester. Perched atop a green container next to the Peel Monument in the city's Piccadilly Circus, wearing a grey tracksuit as well as his iconic mask, Meekz showered the assembled crowd with Nike Air Max 90 trainers before performing two songs, igniting a frenzy of excitement and anticipation among the fans who gathered.

"I initially planned to give away some actual clothing, but I didn't have the chance or the time. Everything was moving that fast," recalls Meekz. In essence, this community-centric approach was no random act of altruism; it was a ritualistic homage to his origins, a gesture of gratitude to the community that raised him and which continues to nurture his ascent in the scene. Each pair of trainers was a token of appreciation, a silent vow to remain tethered to the streets he grew up on.

"It just made a lot of sense for me to do that. I still got some bits and bobs to give away to the peopledem," he says when we meet for his Rolling Stone UK interview, days after he released his new single, 'Mini Me's', and announced his sophomore mixtape, *TRU*, set for release on 24 May.

Before going on hiatus, Meekz etched his name in the archives of British rap with a string of noticeable releases that captivated audiences far and wide. From the resounding success of EP *Can't Stop Won't Stop* in 2020 to the seismic impact of his debut mixtape *Respect the Come Up* in 2022, Meekz emerged as a formidable force, with a sound defined by razor-sharp lyricism and larger-than-life confidence.

As he prepares to unveil his latest project, Meekz stands at the threshold of a new chapter. During our chat, the rapper reveals a vulnerable, honest side to him that fans are not privy to seeing. He speaks candidly about how his perspective has shifted since his earlier work, and he is frank in acknowledging the slippery slope between artistic integrity and public expectations.

"Last time, I was probably thinking about the people rather than what I wanted," he muses, his words tinged with an air of contemplation and reflection. "But this time around, I'm more open to do what I want to do and [to] experiment. I'm not worried about opinions."

With his creative vision duly unfettered by the constraints of convention and his spirit unbound, *TRU* sees Meekz invite listeners on his journey of self-discovery. It is a tribute to the power of music in illuminating the depths of his real-life experiences. For the rap artist, its title embodies the intangible essence of family legacy and lineage. "The word 'Tru', I had it tattooed on me when I was 14," says Meekz. "One of my family members got it on their gravestone, and my uncle used to send me letters years ago from a bad place and he used to put TRU at the bottom of the letters. It's all just about where I come from and where I'm going."

Meekz is from Gorton, a part of Manchester that is considered forgotten, left behind and neglected. But he also spent a lot of his time in the inner-city suburb of Harpurhey, which tends to be left out of his come-up story. "Because I spent most of my life in Harpurhey, you've got to big that up," he says, as he reflects on his upbringing. "I can appreciate the fact that I'm in a new place now. I've been blessed and I always have to respect the come up."

If his generosity to fans at his appearance in April is one piece of evidence of how much Manchester means to him, one of the tracks on *TRU*, 'Manny', is another. Specially created for his home city, Meekz wants it to be an anthem. In a revelation that illuminates the mixtape, Meekz speaks of the profound impact of Ja Rule's timeless 'New York', which he samples on the track. He talks reverentially about the transformative power of New York's cultural influence as a vibrant hub of music, fashion and unbridled creativity. He says that he aims to take a page out of the city's book through his music.

"The whole world looks at New York as an inspiring place," he says. "From the clothing to the music to the videos, artists that have come from there, time and time again, are global," he says, his tone infused with a palpable sense of urgency. "But why hasn't Manchester got that record similar to Ja Rule's 'New York' that's like, just our record, you get what I'm saying?"

Meekz's vision is for 'Manny' to transcend geographical boundaries. "Before this record was even out, it was tried and tested in every single club in Manchester and London, with the likes of Marcus Rushford and Jesse Lingard. It's been everywhere and it's had a great reception," he says.

Meekz's current release, 'Mini Me's', finds him thinking about the impact of his music on others and the intricate dance between inspiration and imitation. "I've inspired a lot of people to want to be like me, in the sense of like, it's not always a bad thing," he admits proudly. "I've got kids that dress up as me to go to school on World Book Day and stuff. Not going to mention any names, but there are a lot of rappers who have used similar ideas as me in their videos and used my style of filming to the exact point – so there are many ways the song 'Mini Me's' makes a lot of sense."

For all his departure from his earlier work, one aspect of Meekz remains the same: his mask. In a society obsessed with celebrity culture, Meekz's decision to conceal his face is a radical act of defiance, a rejection of the superficial trappings of fame in favour of substance and depth. But it wasn't until Meekz spoke with the respected late fashion designer Virgil Abloh that he began to consider emerging from the shadows of anonymity. "When Virgil Abloh was alive, he said, 'Wow, I can't believe you hide your face from the world. We need to work our way to introduce your face to the world,'" he recalls.

> "Last time, I was thinking about the people rather than what I wanted. This time around, I'm more open to do what I want to do"

Despite the unknown having both its benefits and its disadvantages, Meekz wants his face reveal to be done creatively. "I've had people who have cared and not just said 'Take your mask off.' They've had ideas and were in a position to help, in a position where they could shed some light on [it] in a different way and make it an amazing moment," says Meekz, whose mask, at the time of writing, remains in place.

As he dwells on the future, Meekz's vision is imbued with a profound sense of meaning, intention and desire to impart wisdom and ignite inspiration in the hearts of his listeners. "Everyone doesn't understand that being true to yourself is very important," he says, emphasising that authenticity is integral to every meaningful artistic journey.

"Sometimes there's truth within the lie, but I don't like to make stories and paint pictures – like, a lot of these are just true stories. There's a lot of movies being told here."

HIGH NOTES AND TRUE TALES

Mark Knopfler and AC/DC's Brian Johnson talk to Rolling Stone UK about their new TV series meeting all-time music greats including Tom Jones, Cyndi Lauper and Nile Rodgers

By Nick Reilly

WE'RE LESS THAN ten minutes into the first episode of *Johnson and Knopfler's Music Legends* when Tom Jones bursts into an impromptu rendition of 'Black, Brown and White' by fabled Blues legend Big Bill Broonzy, accompanied by Mark Knopfler on guitar and AC/DC's Brian Johnson on backing vocals.

It's a lovely, candid moment from three icons in a show that can best be described as the televisual equivalent of a warm hug for music lovers. The premise is simple enough: Knopfler and Johnson traverse the globe and sit down with the likes of Jones, Sam Fender, Cyndi Lauper, Nile Rodgers, Carlos Santana and Emmylou Harris to discuss their storied careers.

But it's the instant warmth and rapport of these two Geordie lads done good that allows the show to soar. In their presence, we see their glittering guests telling the untold side of their journeys – whether that's Fender's tough upbringing on Tyneside or Tom Jones' early meetings with the mob in New York. There's enough here to engross casual fans and music anoraks alike and, crucially, the palpable sense that the pair are loving every minute, too.

"Maybe it's the way the guests felt so comfortable with us, and I'm proud that me and Mark can, you know, spread that feeling," explains Johnson, as the pair spoke to Rolling Stone UK about the series.

Two Geordie icons unite is a large part of this show's premise. Were you mates beforehand?

KNOPFLER: We were both playing in Düsseldorf, and a pal of mine from Northumberland happened to be in the hotel with us and he said, "Brian Johnson's in the bar!" I went straight through and said hello. That was about eight years ago, but it just seems like we've been friends for 20 or 30 years; I mean, it was an immediate connection.

JOHNSON: It doesn't matter what we're talking about either, whether it's the beat groups or Aretha Franklin or Otis Redding or whatever it is. We're both music fans, so we were just away, and we're both old motor heads as well. We've both done a bit of racing here and there, although not anymore – we'd just frighten ourselves! I can't see that far.

Did the show seem like a natural extension of this friendship?

JOHNSON: Well, the first thing was I had a show already called *A Life on the Road*, and Mark was one of my desired guests. We went to Whitley Bay and Tynemouth Priory, and we shot the thing inside a lovely old pub in Tynemouth. It was so wonderful because we went down on the sands and the beach afterwards and we both have a particular love for the area. At the end, Mark said to me, "Isn't it a shame that we couldn't just keep walking and filming and talking." That stuck in my head.

KNOPFLER: Our managers agreed, and we filmed this over a year, and it did feel like herding cats a bit, the way we had to travel around and meet all these people, but we got through it, and the production team did a really good job on it.

There's a lovely rapport between yourselves and the guests on the show that encourages them to open up. I found it particularly interesting when Tom Jones was talking about his early days and performing in New York and meeting the mob. Have you ever met any characters like that over the years?

KNOPFLER: Oh, yes, and I'm sure Brian has. You meet these characters when you play at clubs around the world and certainly on the security side of it. In fact, there was a time when it infiltrated into the agencies and promoters, too. It was all part and parcel of the game, you know, but it didn't stop you loving the game then.

JOHNSON: Nefarious characters are rampant in music. You've just gotta find the good ones. There's a lot of guys out there who are ready to take advantage of anybody's dream of making it big, and it happens everywhere. I'm not going to name specific TV shows, but there's some that just exploit people for entertainment, too.

Do you think it gives a different perception of your guests because they open up in your company?

JOHNSON: Yes, because in America, Tom Jones is just, well, you've just got to mention his name, you know. It's immediate, and I'm sure it is in England, but he should be elevated, and people understand when they see the show what a fucking great talent he is!

There are some other brilliant guests too: Cyndi Lauper, Sam Fender and Carlos Santana. Was there anything unexpected you may have learnt about them?

KNOPFLER: Absolutely. If you just take Cyndi, you know, you're reminded obviously of what a fantastic voice she had. But she went on to have a career in film and musicals, and you often forget that. It helped us to remember that and, well, of course she did. Because she is *that* talented, and there's a girl who could break through and do anything she wanted to do in spite of all the opposition.

JOHNSON: We got to feel the warmth of these people, too. We'd heard stories that Cyndi could be difficult to work with and a former wild child, but nothing could be further from the truth. She brought a dulcimer with her and was playing it, singing, and it was just a wonderful surprise. Maybe it's the way they felt so comfortable with us, and I'm proud that me and Mark can, you know, spread that feeling.

You do your fair bit of globe-trotting for the show, too, so I wanted to ask, where's the weirdest place in the world you've heard an AC/DC or Dire Straits song being played?

POP IDOLS
Johnson and Knopfler chat to Tom Jones

TYNE TEAM Knopfler (centre) and Johnson (right) meet Sam Fender

SKY

"I got a shock a few years ago when a study revealed that listening to AC/DC makes surgeons operate faster than they usually do. They concentrate more, too" — *Johnson*

JOHNSON: I got a shock a few years ago when a study revealed that listening to AC/DC makes surgeons operate faster than they usually do. They concentrate more, too, apparently!

KNOPFLER: A pal of mine said he heard Dire Straits in a taxi in Nepal. My friend asked the driver about it, and he said, "That singer! He had balls of steel!" Music does translate and it's a wonderful, wonderful thing when people feed back to you from around the world from the strangest places and the oddest circumstances. It's resonating with people, and with this show we hope that our guests will find a place in the lives of the people who see the programme.

Sam Fender is one of your guests and, like yourselves, something of a true Geordie hero. What first drew you to him?

KNOPFLER: We both like everything about him, and you feel everything more keenly because he's still a youngster and he's got it all in front of him. I mean, Brian got up and played with him at [Newcastle's] St James' Park, and when Sam plays there – believe me – it's some event!

JOHNSON: Yeah, it was a special night. When I got on that stage, the roar was spine-tingling! St James' Park is just the centre of the universe. It sits on a hill, and you can see it from everywhere; the noise and the passion of the people there is extraordinary. It really is.

Did Sam ask any advice from you two?

JOHNSON: He'd been working at Mark's British Grove Studios, and he's done some of the tracks on his new album there, so he was obviously learning a lot and trying to emulate some of Mark. But in conversation, he was very nice to us about what we'd done and he's a smart kid.

KNOPFLER: He's got it all to go all the way.

He feels like a generational voice in many ways for a lot of people, too.

KNOPFLER: Absolutely. He's like another young Springsteen, which is why he identifies so strongly with him, and that's why he's recording in the States and going through that phase himself. But he's gonna keep taking creative steps, and I wish him all the very best. He does great with his band around him, but he's gonna need a lot of support with good management. But even if it was to crash here and there, I think Sam is going to go all the way.

And finally, Brian, you're back on the road with AC/DC this summer. How much of a joy and relief is it to get back on the road after all the trouble you've endured with your hearing?

JOHNSON: Well, I just don't know what to think! We tested it last October at Power Trip festival in the Vegas desert, and it seemed to work pretty well out there. I'm just gonna give it a shot and I'm lucky that modern technology has allowed me to be here and have that shot. Y'know, I'm just gonna be here singing until I fall down. ®

Star Rising

Currently starring in *Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes*, Freya Allan broke through playing a princess in TV series *The Witcher*. But this 22-year-old has her feet firmly on the ground as she sets her sights on the future

BY ANNA SMITH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JORDAN OWEN

As a teenager, Freya Allan set a firm goal for her early twenties.

"I WANTED TO be in a film that was in the cinema." Lo and behold, this is happening – like everything she sets out to do, it seems. The determined 22-year-old actress is starring in the new blockbuster *Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes*, as a human in a world dominated by apes. This, off the back of roles in films *Baghead* and *Gunpowder Milkshake*, the TV series *The Third Day* and, of course, her portrayal of princess Ciri in the hit TV series *The Witcher*.

If Allan is on the cusp of even bigger things, she comes across as self-aware, sensible and cautious about letting it go to her head. "They're just getting swept up in it all and not realising that their ego is flying through the roof," she says of actors who get distracted by the fame game. "That's my worst nightmare." Her friends and family keep her grounded, she says, when we dig into her life story over a hot chocolate in Soho. It's March 2024, and she remarks that this is one of her first in-person interviews, rather than an online one. It strikes me that most of her adult acting life has coincided with either a pandemic or the actors' strikes. I'm curious to know what came before that.

"I did a lot in my childhood," she tells me, choosing her words carefully. "I was born in London, then moved to Oxford, then I went and lived in Australia for a year with my mum. Then I lived in the Pyrenees in the middle of nowhere and went to a French school," she says, before pointing out the lack of glamour in the latter scenario. "It was tiny. The toilets were outside. It was freezing and snowing, and you go to these wooden cubicles. It was very French. I was very stubborn by that point. I wanted to go home, so I just refused to learn French." It seems the ploy worked. "Finally, we went home, and I went to school in Oxford."

Her parents separated when she was one, "But they did a really good job of making it feel like I have a really good relationship with both of them," she says. Nonetheless, the split played a part in shaping her character. "You build a kind of emotional maturity when you're quite young because you have to be a bit of a mediator at times, without meaning to be."

She was an only child until she was 11. "I was always just imagining things and make-believing on my own in the garden. But then when my mum got pregnant with my little brother, I was so excited. All I wanted was a sibling my whole childhood. And now me and my brother, we're like best friends." Through her father, she also has a six-year-old half-sister who she enjoys babysitting.

As for Allan, she was on stage *before* she was six, albeit at primary school. "They were casting the Nativity, and they were reading through the cast sheet. They said that I was playing one of the bad wolves that eats the sheep. And I instantly put my hand up and I said, 'I don't want to be a baddie.' And so, they made me a vegetarian wolf. And then I had this line which said I was a vegetarian wolf. I got lots of laughs."

The acting seed was sown, and she went on to appear in a ballet version of *Rapunzel*. "Every town they went to, they would get kids to be in it, and it would just run for a week. I hadn't actually done dance, but I was very performative in the audition so I somehow managed to stand out. I bawled my eyes out when it was done."

A drama scholarship at secondary school followed. "I did the plays, and every break-time at school, every after-school was spent making routines for my friends, singing musicals: I was obsessed. I found my iPad the other day, and it has tons of videos of me trying to figure out moves to musicals. I was obsessed with *Matilda the Musical*. I wanted to be in it. I was that little bit too tall at that point. I just got in there a bit too late. It shattered me that I couldn't be in it because I was obsessed at the time."

Undeterred, she took it upon herself to get an agent – at the age of 14. "I clocked that, 'Oh, there's young people in TV and film. How do they do that?' I researched and I was like, 'I want to do that.' I basically emailed agents and told my parents, 'I've got a meeting with an agent' and they were like, 'What?!' My agent kept telling me, 'Once you reach 16, you're going to be able to get roles because of the licensing.'"

Sure enough, at 16, she was cast in Netflix's fantasy drama *The Witcher*, alongside Henry Cavill and later Liam Hemsworth. Initially, she was seen for a small role rather than Ciri, princess of Cintra. "When I auditioned for Ciri, I was told I couldn't play it because they were going for a different appearance. I was so upset because in the books she sounds like she looks exactly how I was. I just felt such a connection to the character, and I felt like the audition went so well. It felt natural and right."

She found out that they were reconsidering her for the role when her mother showed up at her secondary school. "When I saw her, I had a feeling that they changed their minds. I was just so excited."

Next up is *Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes*. The next trilogy in the hit franchise is set several generations in the future, after Caesar's reign, in a world where apes are the dominant species, and humans – including Allan's character – are living in the shadows. It's quite different in tone from the previous movies, she says. "It has a coming-of-age feeling. Visually, it feels a lot brighter and more adventurous. It feels very lush and has a twinkle."

The film co-stars Owen Teague, William H Macy, Kevin Durand, Dichen Lachman and Peter Macon and is directed by Wes Ball (*The Maze Runner*), whom Allan speaks very highly of. "He was one of the few directors I've been able to trust fully. He would surprise you with ideas you hadn't even necessarily considered. And that's

"I never show much of what's going to happen pre-shoot. Then, action goes"

"You never stop learning. Every project, I wish I could go back and redo it"

what I think a good director should do. You're building a backstory, and you've come to know the character, and so it's nice when someone can actually challenge you on that. He's a very smart man. He is made to be a director of sci-fi films – he clearly has such a passion for it."

On her acting style, she's more fluid and prefers to work in the moment. "I'm going to see how I change over the years, but I'm not instantly a rehearsal kind of actor," she says. "So, some directors will say that I never really show much of what's going to happen pre-shoot. But then, action goes, and suddenly they get it. I describe it as jumping out of the plane."

When it comes to auditions, Allan has on more than one occasion jumped on a plane at short notice for a casting. She nods when I suggest that it must be advantageous to be a spontaneous person in this business – and how the lifestyle is a challenge for those around her. "My family have got used to it, but I think with romantic relationships, it's a bit tough."

She adds, "I was in a two-year relationship, but I'm single now. Which I'm loving. I really value my friends and my work, and I feel like it's such an exciting time. It's an amazing thing when you get to a point where you are fully happy single. I feel like prior, I've been wanting to have that, but I feel content on my own path now. I'm 22 – there's plenty of time to be in a committed relationship."

In person, the actress comes across as mature for her young age, while also being acutely aware of the fact that she is still very much changing. "You never stop learning. Every project, I wish I could go back and redo it because I feel like I learned so much," she muses. Even in terms of her personal style, she believes she is still discovering her identity, and indeed did all her own styling, hair and makeup for her Rolling Stone UK shoot. "It was really fun to be able to have full creative control, especially since I think I've now figured out what my style is and what clothes I'm drawn to and really love it as another creative outlet.

"The last few years I've really gotten into vintage and second-hand shopping, so most of the clothes in the shoot are vintage pieces I found around New York, where we shot. I really wanted there to be a timelessness to the shoot and for it to feel like me, and Jordan the photographer really supported that with the way he shot."

Her music taste is evolving, too. "*Matilda*'s gone now. That had its day," she laments. If she's singing around the house, she might go for *Hamilton*, or an emotional ballad. "It's probably some actor thing. We like to feel emotion," adding that it helps to be empathetic in her profession. "You have to be willing to see other people. Sometimes, playing characters you don't even really like, you have to get to a point where you do. When people are saying things against them, you just want to defend them."

While she is "very proud" to be in a big studio film like *Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes*, she's keen to diversify her roles. "I also want to do grounded things away from VFX. That's my next aim. I want to be doing some really great writing, and really gritty films."

Gendered roles in film have been on her mind, too. "I was just talking about this with a couple of my cast mates last night. We were saying we feel like a lot of the really great roles at the moment are for men, and I feel like it's having a bit of another decline in good female roles," she says. "I notice that sometimes when people ask me, who's my favourite actor or actress, my mind automatically goes to a man, and I hate that, but it's because my brain goes to something with a great story, and it's often been a man. There needs to be work done there. There are so many amazing stories where there can be women at the centre or about women who have existed."

Those double standards equally apply to older actors, she adds. "What I really struggle with and find really frustrating – not that this is what it is about – is that men are able to still be sexy in their 50s and women less so." That said, Allan goes on to note that the parts for women generally become more interesting as they get older. "A lot of the best roles are in your 30s or later. I feel like there's a lot of stuff in your 20s that's coming of age, which is great. But once you get to a certain age where they can believe that you've lived a longer life, there can be a lot more interesting roles," says Allan as we wrap. "I'm actually excited for the future."

BEHIND

Since he dropped his face covering, MOBO Award-winning drill star K-Trap has preferred to project his real self rather than an enigma, and his upcoming debut album *Smile?*, about mental health, is the soul-baring result

THE MASK

BY EMMANUEL ONAPA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FILMAWI EFREM

MASKS IN RAP have become an irrefutable trope. Elusive. Enigmatic. Cryptic. It's a way for artists to express a dual persona. However, one consequence for those who wear them is that through the barrier they cannot be humanised, and they are perceived as masked musicians attempting to scurry away from the carnage that can come with fame.

It's a revelation K-Trap has come to terms with since he abandoned his face covering. "Why would you even care, or why do you even want to know why someone with a mask is happy or sad? You can't even see them to know them," he says.

Meeting the rapper in a studio in Westminster, it is evident from his comfortable manner that this place is his oasis. It's been five years since he decided to shelve his balaclava in 2019 and reveal his identity to the world for the first time via the music video to single 'Big Mood', and his career has been on full throttle ever since. From gold-certified track 'Warm' climbing to number 17 on the Official UK charts in 2022 to bringing home a MOBO Award for Best Drill Act this year – for the second time in a row – *and* receiving his first Brit Award nomination, his accolades continue to pile beyond belief at the tender age of 28.

Now, he is fired up for the release of his debut album, *Smile?*, at the end of May. The title alludes to pleasure, amusement, good intentions and belonging. In his current era, K-Trap feels free to fully embrace his creativity. "I feel like with the mask on, I wouldn't be able to be the person I am now, wouldn't be able to express and paint these pictures that I'm about to paint in the album," he says.

On it, the rapper wrangles with the leap from being quite low-profile to having to adapt to the overfamiliarity that comes with fame. "Apart from music, I don't give off much of myself so far," says K-Trap candidly. "How I've been and where I've come from, we don't open up and let people in. Now I'm transitioning to being more open and showing more of my character outside of the music."

For those with attentive ears to listen, K-Trap's debut album intends to contribute to the broader theme of mental health, with *Smile?* taking us on a journey into K-Trap's complex emotional well-being. Throughout the project, he delves deep into his emotions and confronts them head-on. "The reason why my album will contribute to conversations around mental health is because making the music I've been making, people think that it's very dark and one-way," says K-Trap. "To have someone like me, with respect and credibility, I have to open up more, and showing different emotions will encourage other people to do the same. When it comes to mental health, the people that stand at the forefront aren't normally from similar walks [of life] as me, and to see someone from a similar background go through the same pain as you and do something different is encouraging."

As K-Trap is considered the godfather of UK drill music by various cultural tastemakers, you would expect the genre to be playing constantly in his headphones. But in reality, drill plays a minuscule role in his daily life. "It's not that I don't listen to drill," he says. "I'm a mood person, and whatever I feel today is what I listen to. It could be drill, but it's not likely to be drill. It could be hip-hop, R&B, slow jams, or Afrobeats. I can even listen to instruments – that's how I am."

In the middle of some banter about our musical perspectives, K-Trap whips out his iPhone to play what was at the top of his playlist this morning. "*Tell me what you want (Mmm) / Tell me what you need (Ah, yeah)*" – the melodies of Dru Hill's 'Tell Me' vibrantly echo through his phone speakers while K-Trap bobs his head with a slight smirk on his face, revealing another of the many sides of the young mogul. "I was just listening to this song in the gym," he confesses with a chuckle.

Balancing personal vulnerability with the more rigid exterior conveyed by his music is a critical challenge for K-Trap to overcome. "It's a hard one because when you're known for certain types of stuff, it's like a smudge on your name," he says. Like a mark blotted stubbornly on a white piece of fabric, it can be difficult for K-Trap to navigate public perception outside the bounds of others' opinions. "People don't think you have emotions and don't think you can be sad or something," he says before reflecting on his experiences. "The same way I was saying to you, I was going to the gym today and listening to slow songs. I made a snap video singing to one of the songs, and a few people messaged me saying, 'You changed.' I'm like, 'Bro, I'm just listening to a song!' It's a bit frustrating. If I wanted to, I couldn't tell people if I was heartbroken or going through things."

As well as individual accolades, the past year has also seen K-Trap win plaudits for his collaboration with Headie One. On 22 September 2023, K-Trap and Headie One dropped their highly anticipated joint project, *Strength to Strength*. The mixtape comprises 10 tracks, each infused with 808 beat sequences and fast-paced high hats. K-Trap and Headie One have perfected the art of releasing music frequently without compromising on quality, which earned them a nomination for Group of the Year at the

CREATIVE DIRECTION AND PRODUCTION BY DAISY DEANE
STYLING BY CARLOTTA CONSTANT; GROOMING BY MAYA MAN
WEARING: BURBERRY AND ALYX

“WITH THE MASK ON, I WOULDN’T BE ABLE TO BE THE PERSON I AM NOW”

2024 Brit Awards. “On the nomination, there’s not much I can speak about,” says K-Trap. “We’re not a group, if I’m being honest, but we’ll take it. I understand where they’re coming [from] with it. Headie One and I have a lot of chemistry,” he says. “We just do what we do best. There’s nothing technical about it – he’s changed his life; I’ve changed my life, and we’re both just trying to win.”

IN RAP, IT’S easy to be swayed by the meteoric flaunting of wealth and overindulgence in luxuries: jewellery, watches, cars, houses, 1942 tequila bottles, and so on. But fatherhood brings K-Trap a more gratifying flex. “My love for being a dad is a much more important happiness,” he says. “It gives you more reason to take this thing as far as you can go and keep your foot on the gas; it’s more motivation.”

This year, K-Trap has decided to become an investor in rapper friend Krept’s Black-British-owned baby hair and skincare business Nala’s Baby, alongside Anthony Joshua, Nafe Smallz, Yung Filly and Jourdan Dunn, among others. Commenting on the endeavour, K-Trap says, “Investing in the right business is important. Krept is my close friend, and he’s a role model; he’s helped me greatly in and away from music. It’s a no-brainer for many reasons: one, because of who the person is; two, because of how it’s come about; and three, because I have a child myself.”

Balancing commercial success and maintaining the authenticity that defines his influence across Britain is paramount for K-Trap. “In your life, there are different stages for different things. I know my roots; I know where I’ve come from. But if I were to make a commercial song now, it would be because I want to make a commercial song; so, as long as I want to make it, I’m staying true to me,” he says. “I’ve got certain principles and morals, but I’ll definitely exercise being a musician and not just a drill artist.”

With the constant flow of favourable outcomes manifesting in K-Trap’s life, it’s become impossible to dispute his imprint on the UK scene. Acknowledging the positive success of each of these moments is essential to him. “It will be weird for me not to recognise my achievements over the years or getting nominated for these things,” he says. “Don’t wait until it’s too late when I don’t need or can’t even smell the flowers.”

His advice for young Black men trying to pivot and stay on the path to success is to remain diligent, maintain composure and stick to the grind. “If you want to grow and do good for yourself, you have to do just that. There’s no going around it; it’s that simple. There are no excuses. It’s now or never.”

BECKY HILL

NOT MISSING A BEAT

This chart-topping, two-time BRIT Award-winner has fought hard to get to where she is. As she releases her deeply personal second album *Believe Me Now?*, she's determined to make an impact on a global scale

BY BEN JOLLEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK CANT
CREATIVE BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN
STYLING BY RICHARD SAINT-FORD

BECKY WEARS CHAIN VEST TOP BY **STELLA MCCARTNEY**

BECKY HILL ALWAYS knew she wanted to be a performer. She first set her sights on music as a toddler watching Sonique's *Top of the Pops* performance in 2000. "I remember grabbing the telly as a two-year-old and going 'I wanna do that!'" she says.

Regardless of who or what would get in her way, the Worcestershire-born artist was determined to make her dream a reality. Fast-forward to 2024 and the dance-pop vocalist and songwriter is widely regarded as one of the biggest names in British pop music. She may make it look effortless, but the chart-topping star's journey to the top has been long and hard-fought. But the two-time BRIT Award-winner – whose dazzling dance-anthem-filled second album *Believe Me Now?* is out on 31 May – wouldn't have it any other way.

"I really feel like the universe has always looked after me, and given me a massive direction," reflects Hill when Rolling Stone UK meets her at swanky Camden rehearsal studio FOMO.

It's clear that her passion for music has never wavered. Spending time in Hill's company, as she speaks openly about her career to date and the unpredictable challenges she has faced, before hearing her sing a capella during tour rehearsals alongside an incredible brass band – which would join her on her recent European tour – proves just how far she has come.

AFTER HILL BEGAN to sing with her brother at the age of nine, their mum bought her a bright-pink guitar for Christmas. At the age of 10, she started guitar lessons. By this point, music was a part of everyday life: from her dad's love of Northern Soul and her mum's favourite musicians (Eric Clapton, Anastasia and Foreigner) to her brother's love of all types of dance music (ranging from drum'n'bass to hardstyle and speedcore), and her older sister's top bands including Breaking Benjamin, Maroon 5 and Evanescence.

Soon after, Hill began forming her own taste, which hinged on Robyn ("she was big for me"), Passion Pit ("that first album changed my life"), Biffy Clyro ("I think they're incredible live") and Bon Iver. "Diving deep" into the world of drum'n'bass led to her discovering scene leaders like Netsky and Wilkinson, too.

When she sang in public for the first time, aged 11, Hill recalls people turning around, looking at her parents and asking them, "Did you know she could do this?" A conversation about sending Hill to BRIT School followed, but it wasn't financially feasible. However, upon coming to that decision, her glam-rock-loving mum said something that Hill has never forgotten: "If music is meant for her, music will find her."

By her early teens, Hill had started writing her own songs and joined a band aged 15. Within two years, she had written a full 12 tracks that they performed locally. It was while juggling working at a pub in the small town of Bewdley with doing the open-mic circuit that Hill received a Facebook message containing details of a TV singing competition called *The Voice* from one of her newfound community of musicians. Soon

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BECKY WEARS JACKET BY **NANUSHKA**

OPPOSITE

BECKY WEARS SHIRT BY **AERON**, EARRINGS BY **SAINT LAURENT**, CUFF BANGLE BY **JACQUEMUS**, RING BY **PARIAH**

after applying, Hill found herself on the train to Birmingham. “I was 17, on my own, writing the lyrics to ‘Ordinary People’ on my hand,” she recalls. But, once she arrived and started seeing people doing vocal warm-ups in corners, she felt out of place. “I asked myself, ‘What the fuck am I doing here?’”

It was a surprise to Hill when her powerful rendition of John Legend’s ballad won over the judges. As this life-changing moment began to unfold, at the back of her mind was an awareness that she had a stack of sixth-form coursework to do and, due to feeling low emotionally, was falling “quite deep into a depression”. For both reasons, she realised that the show would be a legitimate excuse to get out of her studies – “because they can see me live on Saturday night TV every week”. Hill also had an epiphany: “I thought, ‘Anything has got to be better than working two bar jobs and feeling incredibly miserable about my life because I don’t know where it’s going.’”

Her stint on the TV talent show’s debut series in 2012 was like “going to university”, she remembers. At 18, she moved to the capital. “I had the time of my life,” she says of the experience. Going out raving for the first time on her 18th birthday was life-changing too. “I hadn’t experienced a roomful of people who

“DANCE MUSIC IS PROBABLY THE MOST PROGRESSIVE, VERSATILE AND CULTURE-CHANGING GENRE THERE IS”

were completely equal,” she recalls of stepping inside London clubbing institution fabric for a drum’n’bass night hosted by Playaz Recordings, where she saw sets by Taxman and Original Sin. “It didn’t matter how you were dressed or spoke, what your parents did or where you were from or who you know. It was purely about dancing to music. I loved it and didn’t look back.”

When Hill was voted off *The Voice*, she had one internal question: ‘How do I have that much fun all the time?’ Though tempted after meetings with potential managers – one promised her “a hundred grand in six months” – she ended up signing with Alex Martin, who remains her manager today.

A tour with drum’n’bass band Rudimental followed when Hill was 19 and unsigned. While starting to learn her craft as a performer, ‘Afterglow’ (her collaboration with drum’n’bass producer Wilkinson) was released, Hill got signed, and the track entered the Top 10 in late

"I WANT TO BE THE NEXT CALVIN HARRIS OR DAVID GUETTA"

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BECKY WEARS SHIRT AND TROUSERS BY **AERON**, EARRINGS BY **SAINT LAURENT**, NECKLACE BY **LAURA LOMBARDI**, CUFF BANGLE BY **JACQUEMUS**

OPPOSITE

BECKY WEARS CHAIN VEST TOP BY **STELLA MCCARTNEY**

2013. “It was my first big hit, and everything just went from there,” she recalls. In July 2014, Hill scored her first number one single with ‘Gecko (Overdrive)’ with EDM producer Oliver Heldens.

In November of that year, Hill released her debut solo single, ‘Losing’, through Parlophone. But the high didn’t last after she was dropped right before Christmas. “I felt like it was my fault,” she recalls. Disillusioned with big labels, she decided to launch her own, EKO Music, and took a DIY approach when it came to her debut EP, music videos, remixes, artwork and her first headline show at Electrowerkz in 2016. But the financial pressure was tough. “When you’re £90,000 deep into releasing your music, aged 22, you start to wonder if you’re doing it for the right reasons,” she says.

Undeterred, Hill scored a clutch of chart hits over the next few years, lending her voice to radio-dominating bangers like ‘Piece of Me’ with MK. However, such success made it difficult for her to shake off the ‘featured artist’ tag. “Everybody was still more bothered about the producers making the songs rather than the female vocalist on them – although I was writing and singing all of these records,” she says. Though she’s “grateful for all the success”, Hill says, “the ambition has always been to make a success of myself in my own right.”

A meeting with Polydor Records proved a turning point, with Hill signing with them in 2017 and releasing her debut album *Only Honest on the Weekend* in 2021. That time was “very uncertain”, she says, “because I didn’t have much confidence at all”. After some negative reviews – “I listen to everything” – release day resulted in her sobbing into the box of CDs. “I think I realised, ‘This is what it’s all for,’ but it was the idea that I actually had something to show for it.”

As the songs chronicled nine years of Hill’s life where *a lot* happened, she says, “it still felt very unsure of itself” and suggests there was a three-way battle going on – “between pop music, mid-tempo pop music, and dance-floor, rave music. It hadn’t quite figured itself out.” Despite this, Hill stayed determined. “I loved the music I was making and how lucky I was to do this job. There were some amazing songs on it, too.”

Album two, then, represents Hill’s evolution – both as a person and artist. “It’s a concise body of work, and totally clear on its direction… everything feels like it belongs together,” she says. Alongside showcasing her singular powerhouse vocal and stunning acrobatic range, *Believe Me Now?* finds Hill leaning into her dance music roots, with her feet planted firmly in the club (especially on rave-ready ‘Linger’). “Dance music is probably the most progressive, versatile and culture-changing genre there is,” enthuses Hill. “I want to show that it can still be emotive, euphoric and intimate, like when I was growing up,” she adds, recalling crying to songs by her ‘Disconnect’ collaborators Chase & Status.

Weaving between drum’n’bass, house, techno and trance, the beats are harder and faster than ever (aside from acoustic Adele-like mid-album breather ‘Man of My Dreams’). Throw in strong pop hooks, singalong choruses and grandiose orchestral strings, and Hill has crafted a record’s worth of festival-ready anthems.

It’s not just the deeper production that sounds more sure of itself though – Hill’s lyrical inspiration has matured, too. “I chuckle when I listen to ‘Better Off Without You’,” she laughs, citing its “nursery rhyme” lyrics. This time around, Hill wanted to write something that felt “a little heavier, but that everybody could connect to”, like how she felt when listening to Robyn’s seminal record ‘Body Talk’. “I wanted this album to reflect a more grown version of me,” considers Hill, who recently turned 30.

Despite being a “daunting task because, at the time, I was really happy”, it resulted in her homing in on the theme of loneliness – “especially the idea of being surrounded by your loved ones yet still feeling a sense of emptiness”. Though a concept, the narrative rang true for Hill on a personal level. This is conveyed right from album opener ‘True Colours’, which was written

about her experience of sexual assault at the age of 21 by somebody she "really trusted". The song's message had been gestating for some time. "It had been eating me away for eight years," she explains. Written with artists Lauren Aquilina, MNEK and Ryan Ashley when Hill was "deep into therapy" and hadn't yet reported the incident to police, she remembers bursting into tears in the studio. "It was a beautiful moment that we shared, even though it was unbelievably hard for me. They gave me room and space to let that feeling be felt."

Hill was adamant that it wouldn't be a sad song, however. "I wanted to write something that was fucking angry and an absolute bop, she says, adding that inspiration came from Kelis's 'Caught Out There' and 'Acapella', and the D Ramirez remix of Yeah Yeah's 'Bodyrox'. "I hope it gives other people the anger they need to back themselves and feel empowered," Hill attests.

Taken from the repeated hook of 'True Colours', the album's title, *Believe Me Now?*, opens a Pandora's box. "The whole of my twenties were overwhelmed and absorbed by this idea that I had to prove myself," reflects Hill. "The fact that my friends didn't believe me about the sexual assault, and that I had to go to the police and consistently prove myself. Proving myself in my job, and to people back home that I hadn't gone on TV and changed for fame. Then there was this idea that 'nobody cares about the featured singer' and having to tell people I was an artist and that they should be listening to my own records."

A huge step up from her debut, *Believe Me Now?* is a record that grabs attention and refuses to be ignored. It should also silence those who once doubted Hill's chance of success, particularly within the dance world. "I was told it's not a global prospect, because being a global artist in dance music is only reserved for a handful of people – and they are usually men," she says defiantly. Hill hopes to change that with album two: "I want to be the next Calvin Harris or David Guetta."

Effortlessly commanding the camera and giving badass energy, Hill's Rolling Stone UK digital cover shoot – in which her choice of statement vests channel Linda Hamilton in *The Terminator* – further conveys her ambitions. Miles away from the unsure teenager she started out as, much like the combatant character Sarah Connor, Hill refuses to be ignored.

She's well on the way to taking her crown, having helped pave the way for a new generation of female dance artists, including Jazzy, Hannah Laing and Hill's former touring DJ turned electronic artist TSHA. "There's so much love between us because we've known each other for eight years," she says. "It's amazing what she's done, especially with how determined she was."

On an industry level, Hill feels that women are getting more respect than ever. Alongside the growing number working behind the scenes, she references Radio 1 DJs Sarah Story and Jaguar's Ibiza residencies. "It's so good to see," she says. Although too modest to give herself credit for helping to lead the change, she adds, "Sometimes I do feel like it's much bigger than me and that I'm doing it for a cause." This belief has stopped her from quitting: "I want a legacy – to be a trailblazer."

With our interview taking place before her first European tour, Hill speaks of being excited "to give people a proper show", with a full live band – including three string players, three brass and two singers. "For so long it's just been me, the backing singers... and a projector," she says, laughing, describing her previous gigs as having "working men's club energy, but for crowds of thousands".

This time, she has world domination in her sights. "I'm hoping this is the year I begin to go global," she says determinedly. It seems that Becky Hill's long-awaited superstar moment is finally here. That instinct she exhibited as a toddler was right all along.

HAIR BY LAURA CHADWICK AT MMG ARTISTS USING BABYLISS PRO AND OLAPLEX
MAKEUP BY WENDY TURNER USING SARRATT; NAILS BY NAIL EMPORIUM LONDON
FASHION ASSISTANT: AARON PANDHER

"I'M HOPING THIS IS THE YEAR I GO GLOBAL"

THIS PAGE

BECKY WEARS VEST TOP BY **HELMUT LANG**, SKIRT BY **BY ROTATION**, SHOES BY **JIMMY CHOO**, EARRINGS BY **SAINT LAURENT**, NECKLACE BY **LAURA LOMBARDI**, CUFF BANGLE BY **JACQUEMUS**

OPPOSITE

BECKY WEARS SHIRT BY **AERON**, NECKLACE BY **LAURA LOMBARDI**

DAVE EAST

Rapping, therapy and a heavy dose of 'Toxic' success

Songer opens up about the cathartic process of songwriting, connecting with his fans about mental health, and his excitement about future collaborations

By Nick Reilly

IF YOU have spent any significant amount of time scrolling through TikTok over the past year, there's a fair chance you'll have come across the music of Songer – even if, with good reason, you may not have realised it was him.

That can happen when an artist scores a viral hit with a song like 'Toxic (Freestyle)', which saw the Reading rapper deliver his own cocksure bars over the sound of Britney Spears' mega tune, netting him his first UK Top 40 hit in the process. "*Man's pulling up in a blacked-out Audi / Acting rowdy, bad man round me*," he spits over the unlikely rhythms of the Cathy Dennis-penned hit.

It's a brilliantly confident freestyle from the rising star, but over coffee in an east London hotel, he's keen to put the record straight, telling me that you should put him in

a box at your peril. "I've been pretty conscious that people's first introduction to me will be that track, and if people are waiting for another freestyle like that, I don't think they're gonna get one," he clarifies. "It crossed my mind because I'm very self-critical, and it was important to follow up with something good soon after that."

That follow-up emerged in March with *The Price of Therapy* – a defiant nine-track mixtape that refuses to beat around the bush in telling you exactly who Songer is. "*This project [is] to remind you who I am / I'm not a viral fucking TikTok, I'm a son*," he states on the bold opener 'Thought Park'. But as the title suggests, it's a chance for the rapper to exorcise his demons, too.

"I use music as a therapeutic thing, but I spend all my time stressing about it," he explains. "So, the thing that was providing therapy, I end up needing therapy for. Every year, I might just have a little check at the price of a therapist, but once I see it, I'll never think about it again! It's always a thing in January. But I'm trying to chase a kind of serenity, and I just know that music is the way I'm going to do that. I want to fight against everything that comes in between."

It's the natural extension, he explains, of being someone who has always jotted down his thoughts and has found great comfort in journalling. "Writing, on a public and private level, has always been hugely important to me," he says. "I've always had a journal to write down my thoughts. It tangibly leaves my head, and I can feel it do that, so it means that I write a lot. The more I do that, the more peace I will find."

He continues, "But trying to balance it with a career is something I need to get better at, whether I'm doing it for me or doing it for my career."

When Songer was growing up in rural Berkshire, that love of writing extended itself to academic success, which was spurred on after scoring an A* in English Literature. "If something happened in my life, I'd always lean on writing," he says. "And I remember one of the first more personal songs I put out was received really well – it inspired me to keep writing and getting better."

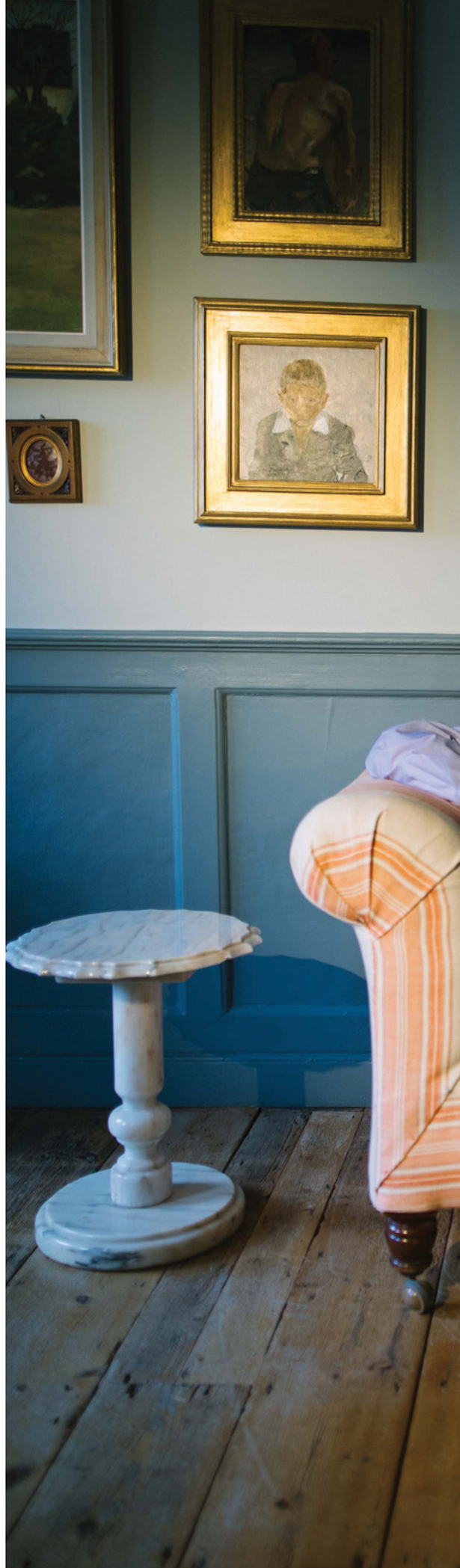
That aforementioned personal song is 'From Us to You' – which sees Songer open up about the devastating impact of losing his close friend Luke Freeman, who died at the age of 19 after falling from a balcony on holiday. "*I got a couple things I gotta do to get my head straight / Got to wear my friend's name and rep it 'til my death date / Should be telling stories at your wedding or your birthday*," he offers on the track, which was written at the request of the youngster's family for his funeral.

"It was a beautiful funeral, and hundreds of people were there. Obviously, I was in bits when the song played, and it was just a proper emotional moment. We ended up putting the song out and raising a load of money for a charity set up in his memory," he says. "But what that situation taught me is that even when something is so sad, you can find the beauty in those situations, and that inspired me to do that. If something happens in life, just write it down and try and create something from it because I think it's the best way that you can remember."

Since the early days of that track – which was released in 2019 – Songer has forged one of UK rap's most passionate fan bases. They've had his back throughout the release of his previous four albums, as well as selling out his brilliant boisterous gigs across the UK. "I'm definitely biased, but I think my shows and my fans are as good as they get," he reflects. "The emotion in the room is so honest and where the lyrics are so personal, I can see different songs meaning different things for different people. It's just such an incredible energy that was quite underground for a while, so it's vindication for these people who had my back for so long."

It's been a powerful thing, too, he explains, to see young men reacting to the aforementioned exploration of grief and mental health within his music. "There's something truly powerful about people hearing those words or some of my deepest songs in rooms like that, and young lads knowing the lyrics. In music, it's been something of a taboo, and I do find it scary, and it is daunting, but that's why it's so gratifying when you're on tour and in a room where people are singing those words back at you.

"It's just a crazy feeling knowing that a song I wrote when I was lying in bed having a bad day ends up being what could help someone when they're walking home from work on their own bad day," says Songer. "It means we've got something in common, and there's a bond there. If we understand each other, then we've got something in common. I've always got their



"It's a crazy feeling knowing that a song I wrote when I was lying in bed having a bad day ends up being what could help someone on their own bad day"

DAVE EAST

Songer

back, and I try to be as open as possible because I might worry a lot, but I don't worry about being myself because that's just part of the way I'm wired."

It's no surprise, too, that his unique voice has already attracted collaborations from some of the genre's leading lights. A collab with grime legend D Double E on '04.59' last year represented the respect he's already garnered in the rap game. "He's one of my favourite human beings in the world," enthuses Songer. "We originally made '04.59' without him and imagined how cool it would be if we got him on the remix, so we sent it to his team, and the next day he just sent back the track with his verse on it. We thought, 'Scrap the remix, we're going with this!' I met him at the video shoot, and we got on; he's come out at my show, and we've got a couple of unreleased songs. He's just someone that MCs and rappers should look up to because he's remained so authentic, as legendary in UK rap as it gets, and just the nicest bloke ever."

That friendship, he explains, sometimes manifests itself in the most unlikely of places, though. "I remember walking my dog once and then a number called me, and I never pick up an unknown number, but that day I did. It was a few days before the video shoot, and he just started doing an ad-lib down the phone to me! I just thought, 'Nah, life is crazy.' You don't forget moments like that."

Elsewhere, he looks at the likes of J.Cole and Alicia Keys as his personal heroes but admits he hasn't given himself "the luxury to think about working with them, because it's just a different stratosphere right now". Instead, he's intent on continuing his ascent in UK rap and proving himself to be a truly unique talent. He teamed up with the V&A in late April to create a new spoken-word piece that re-interprets the Bard's work with contemporary lyrics, before a busy festival season begins.

"But once this album is out, I'm gonna take a week just to recalibrate because there's so much going on at the moment and I'm not having the chance to process it. We did Radio One yesterday, and my mum was jumping up and down with joy because having an interview on there is a universal language of cool that she'll understand." His dad – a keen Public Enemy fan – also played an integral part in his musical education. "I told him I was doing this interview, and it's moments like that, the vindication, where I can just see the look on his face, is the best feeling ever. He's super proud because Songer, too, is my surname."

That's a handy bit of nominative determinism in action. "Yeah, I got dealt a good name for someone who wanted to make music, for sure, and I think about that a lot. It all sounds a bit 3AM at the after-party, but I started thinking about fate and what I've achieved so far. It does really feel like this is what I'm meant to be doing."

GROWING PAINS AND HAPPY ENDINGS

OPENING HER HEART IN HER MUSIC HAS HELPED NELL MESCAL BUILD A DEDICATED FANBASE, BUT THERE'S PLENTY OF ROOM FOR HOPE TOO, THE 21-YEAR-OLD REVEALS, AS SHE RELEASES HER DEBUT EP

BY NICK REILLY

LAST SUMMER, NELL Mescal found herself on the receiving end of some blunt wisdom from Florence Welch, after she supported the singer at a massive outdoor gig in Cork. "I saw her watching my set, and she came up to me afterwards. She just held me and said, 'You need better friends!'" the 21-year-old tells Rolling Stone UK in a north London boozer.

"I had to tell her, 'No, I swear I have better ones now!'"

In fairness to Welch, anyone giving Mescal's music the most casual of listens could be forgiven for drawing that very same conclusion. When the singer, from Maynooth, in Kildare, Ireland, released her debut single 'Graduating' in July 2022, it drew on her experiences of bullying and a tough time at school, which eventually led her to drop out without graduating. More recently, the stirring 'Warm Body', taken from her debut EP *Can I Miss It for a Minute?*, is about "growing up and navigating relationships with the worry that the people you love will leave you".

Tough times like these are a common thread through Mescal's music, sure, but she says that her debut EP is rooted in the universality of it all – there's a certain amount of joy to be found in knowing that these experiences are things that we've all probably gone through at some point.

"I think the overarching message of this EP is knowing that everyone's gone through this. It's not, like, a solo experience, and I'm the only person who's ever been through a friendship break-up

that has felt like the end of the world. All of my friends have been through them, and we're friends because we talked about it."

She adds, "I've always said it, but I love to listen to sad music. I'm listening to the saddest song you've ever heard, and I think it's great to indulge in those feelings, but I also think that at the end of everything you have to be left with some hope because you can't just be sad all the time, and it's not good to romanticise it."

For Mescal, this means that the EP ends on 'July', which sees her vocals buoyed by lush and uplifting instrumental soundscapes. Similarly, the stand-out track 'Killing Time' sees her sadness channelled into an almighty synth-pop banger. "It's nice to end on a song where we can say we've done that now, and we have to say there is so much of an uplift in my life," she says.

Sometimes, though, it's a multitude of life experiences in a single song.

"I wrote 'Warm Body' about a very specific thing in the first line, and then, all of a sudden, I was talking about my childhood and going 'Holy shit, this *all* connects,'" she says. "Look, this is very current, and I hate that I'm referencing it," Mescal coyly adds, "but have you seen *Madame Web*?"

No, I have not seen the Sony-produced Marvel movie that was slammed by reviewers as "god-awful" and received a critical slaughtering upon release earlier this year.

"It's as bad as everyone says, but it's so funny. I was going to say that the film's tagline says, 'Her web connects them all,' so it's a bit like that."

As it happens, that experience is connected in *another* way too – Mescal's cinema experience shows that Welch needn't worry about the quality of her friendships. "It was only me and my friends that were properly laughing, and we felt like assholes, but by the end of it everyone was going, 'Oh God, I can't believe we've wasted a whole afternoon on that.' We just thought the whole thing was really funny."

This sense of friendship and community also translates to Mescal's online following – she has a small army of Gen-Z fans who find kinship in her personal pain and are always on hand to dish out a brilliantly humanising dose of humour, too. "Omg! The Nell Mescal took her brother to the BAFTAS? She's so kind," wrote one fan in February after she attended the awards with her very famous sibling, the Oscar-nominated actor Paul Mescal.

On a cold Wednesday night in January, Rolling Stone UK witnessed this first hand during a sold-out live show at London's Omeara. Mescal was headlining the venue, having played support to Manchester singer Phoebe Green just 12 months previously.

The thinnest of pins could be heard to drop when she opened with the raw pain of 'Graduating', but by the time she ended nearly an hour later with the soaring guitar pop of 'Homesick' – its chorus lyric of "*YOU SAID THERE'S NO SHAME IN THAT*" screamed back by her fervent fans – the roof of the south London venue felt fit to collapse.

"That last tour was special because I'd play a show in Nottingham, and I'd see people queueing up outside and just be like 'What the fuck?' I didn't even know what Nottingham was two years ago. I'm just from Maynooth, and it's such a weird feeling calling my mum and being like, 'Oh, there's 20 people in the queue outside already even though it's raining.' It's so strange, but fan culture is a really, really special thing."

It has, Mescal explains, been a baptism by fire, too. A grotty tour bus, after all, is a rite of passage for any rising artist. "I'm prone to getting a little bit ill on the tour bus, so we have a dehumidifier on there, but there's water in it, and we have to tape it down in the middle. If the van suddenly swerves, we're all holding it!" she explains.

Dodgy tour buses aside, Mescal also says that her experiences of playing live have honed her debut EP – she has embraced raw vocals and subtle slip-ups after noticing that two of her personal heroes did the same thing. "I wanted to keep it as real as possible," she says. "All I wanted to do is make sure people can hear what they're going to hear live, imperfections and everything. We wanted to take as raw a vocal as we could, and I think that's perfect to me, all these little mistakes that you can hear. It's like Adrienne Lenker, you can hear her fuck up, and she'll audibly say that! I don't think I've audibly fucked up, but it felt live. I also reference Lucy Dacus too because she makes records that are *so* live while also being so recorded. I think she measures those two worlds, and if I could do a bit of that, I'd be really happy."

As for the overarching story and her own personal pain behind the EP, Mescal says she was not ready to "leave it behind without being tied up nicely with a bow". This record – and the palpable emotion – is the reflection of that. "I think it is gonna sound sad but there is never a period of time in my life where I've got nothing to write about," she says. "The themes on this EP, I was happy to put them to bed, but it doesn't mean I'm not experiencing some of them in a different way. Even while we were recording, there was crazy stuff happening in my life that I was not ready to write about. My mum hasn't been well, but I can't write about that because it's too raw. It's just trying to figure out the considerate way for myself because it's just hard to write about things that are painful all the time."

Can I Miss It for a Minute? is now out – and one listen to the record shows that it is, as Mescal explained, the perfect way to close that chapter of her life.

"Maybe I'm a narcissist, but I listen to it all the time, back to front, and I'm just so proud of it. I've loved being able to share it with people, even if I shouldn't be doing that before it's out! I'm overwhelmed with how happy I am because being able to spend the time working on it really hard and with the specific team that I worked on it with has actually changed my life."

PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID REISS

Great Music knows no borders

From classic artists like The Beatles and Pink Floyd, to rising superstars including Dua Lipa, Harry Styles and Celeste – 1 in every 10 songs streamed around the world is by a UK artist. Just one example of how UK music unites fans globally, from Austria to Australia and Belgium to Brazil. Join us and see things differently.

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GREAT
BRITAIN & NORTHERN IRELAND

Dua Lipa
performing at The BRITs 2021

FRESH HORIZONS, FRESH SOUNDS

With his PC Music label, A. G. Cook became one of the most influential figures in shaping the pop trends of the past decade. With the label on hiatus, and a new base in LA, he now presents *Britpop*, a mammoth triple album that interrogates ideas of Britishness and sees him tackle his past, present and future

BY WILL RICHARDS

NASSERI

ROMAN ROADS. CHARLI XCX. Mark Twain. Tolkein. The Wild West. These are only a handful of the things that cross A. G. Cook's mind in a single response to a question about his brilliantly ambitious new album, *Britpop*. To the enigmatic producer and co-founder of independent record label PC Music, it all fits together though, similarly to how he's been making hands-in-the-air hits out of seemingly ill-fitting ingredients for a decade.

As a pioneer of the hyper-modern British pop scene of the past decade, Cook has played a vital role in pushing pop forwards and redefining what it can look like. On *Britpop*, he rewrites his past, present and future.

The idea of the album first came to Cook when he found himself in a rural town in Montana during the pandemic. He was living in the hometown of his partner, singer Alaska Reid, but was the only British person in the entire place. "It was the longest time I'd ever spent away from the UK," says the now-LA-based Cook over Zoom from his new home, "and I felt like a bit of an alien."

Both the free time that the pandemic offered and his unusual location led Cook to think of home, and especially ideas of Britishness abroad. "I started to think that there could be something really solid to base new music on, and not just do it in terms of Britpop as a Blur vs. Oasis thing," he muses. "Even though that does interest me too."

Cook admits that he has enjoyed evoking a "confusing era" of Britain in his music – referencing his own permanent Beatles-esque haircut – and saw *Britpop* as a way of "thinking about whatever Britain was in this pseudo-fictional way as well as a biographical way".

The album comes at a time when many millennial Brits of Cook's generation are quick to distance themselves from ideas of Britishness, with a positive national identity viewed by many younger people as being synonymous with a slow but steady slide into fascism, Brexit and the ascent of the right.

"At one point, I was worried if it was too Brexit-y," Cook laughs of the album's title and concept, going on to ban the use of red, white and blue in its artwork and related visual material. "*Britpop* is an interesting title, because both parts of the word have a controversial definition," he says. "People can't agree on Britishness, even as a word. Then you have pop, which is also hard to define. Now there's not as much of a unified mainstream, is pop just what's popular?"

From what could be seen as a throwaway, tongue-in-cheek title, Cook fell down a rabbit hole into creating a fully encompassing thesis on modern Britishness, set inside a 24-song album that feels like his magnum opus.

IDEAS OF BOTH Britishness and pop music have been tied to A. G. Cook for his entire career. Emerging in the early 2010s as the head of the PC Music label, Cook sat at the forefront of a revolution in British pop music, pioneering a maximalist version of the genre, with hedonism at its core. Almost exclusively referred to as "futuristic" and adjacent to the influential hyper-pop sound, it spawned generational voices like SOPHIE and took other already established stars such as Charli XCX and Carly Rae Jepsen under its wing.

In 2024, PC Music's footprint can still be felt

NASSERI

all across the pop world (its affiliate Danny L Harle is a prominent producer on Dua Lipa's new album) even if the label itself announced a hiatus last year. In the summer of 2023, Cook marked a decade of PC Music by announcing that the label would cease releasing new music as of this year, instead focusing only on archival releases.

"The core concept of Personal Computer Music and the friends on the label is still a world that feels really vivid to me," says Cook. "It's not a case of me getting bored of the manifesto of it. It was a case of me zooming out and realising that there was a chance to not just have it end in the same ambiguous way that a lot of labels do. I'm not interested in PC being upsold, but wanted to make a really bold move. Running an indie label is the opposite of printing money, and you have to invest in the culture of it. I thought the ideal way for it to exist was to acknowledge that we achieved way more than I thought we could in those 10 years, and now to be a guardian of that stuff."

While he sprinkled the release of solo singles throughout the early-to-mid-2010s, Cook was

"I CAN'T RESIST BEING IN DIALOGUE WITH THE MUSIC INDUSTRY"

most prominently seen collaborating with others in the PC Music universe and beyond. He took seven years to release his first studio album, 2020's *7G*. "I was very much avoiding the canonical album, the 'A. G. Cook sound'," he says now, before realising that he had a "vantage point" to do so with *7G*. A second album, *Apple*, followed just a month later.

Though many focused on the hyper-Britishness of the vocals on much of PC Music's output, it was a sound that was first taken in by those over the pond. "There was some support in London, but a lot of the early club nights in 2011 or 2012, people would say, 'This is not dance music; this is not pop music,'" Cook remembers. "People in New York and LA would take it more at face value. Lots of PC-affiliated artists have had this funny connection to US culture and embracing it in a more straight-on way."

He adds, "The UK is in this weird world of reliving the same thing over and over, and just hallucinating new ideas. I think PC Music continues that in a funny way, and my take on that and the work I do is perceivably British, let alone considering the accents. It's a funny moment to really dig into that idea, even if I'm

HENRY REDCLIFFE

not doing 'Vindaloo' or anything," he laughs of Fat Les's beery football anthem from 1998.

As with all his work with PC Music, *Britpop* exists in the in-between spaces of these binary ideas and asks more open questions than it provides answers.

It is split into three parts: Past, Present and Future. Though it wasn't written chronologically, with work on each part then influencing and changing the others, it does serve as an overview of Cook's history and where he wants to go next.

The Past section of the album is, predictably, the most traditionally A. G. Cook in its sound. Full of bubbling, plastic-y beats straight from the PC Music canon, it's spearheaded by the deliciously instant and catchy Charli XCX-featuring title track. Most striking though is opening track 'Silver Thread Golden Needle', a swirling 10-minute monster of intense leftfield noise that distils his wonky sound and alluring appeal perfectly.

Britpop then turns on a sixpence into the Present section, a strikingly lo-fi collection of songs mostly written on guitar and almost entirely absent of the electronic chaos that has been his bread and butter until now. "It's got this really present feel to the songwriting," he says of the second part of the collection, which begins with the soft swing of the gorgeous 'Serenade'. Even more stripped back is the lightly Auto-Tuned slow jam 'Nice to Meet You' and nakedly honest 'Green Man'.

After working with incomparable vocalists from Caroline Polachek to Sigur Rós lead singer Jónsi, Cook struggled with the limitations of working with his own voice, but *Britpop* shows him to have beautifully understated and dextrous vocals. These are best shown on 'Serenade' and the swirling 'The Weave'.

Cook describes discs one and two of *Britpop* as "intentionally tight" and able to hold their own as standalone records. Disc three then honours the opaque nature of the future and presents a "grab bag of things that confused me slightly," says Cook. "It's songs I would have trouble categorising even by my own standards."

The final disc begins with the sparkling 'Soulbreaker', which bridges the gap between the gargantuan slabs of synth from Past and the tender songwriting of Present. From there, the Future disc takes Cook to the thumping synth pop of 'Emerald', and the ambient haze of 'Butterfly Craft' and 'Pink Mask'. If the final part of the album is deliberately vague and scattergun in its predictions of what might come next, the cheekily titled closer 'Out of Time' – a seven-minute rager of the hardest beats on the album – at least shows that Cook isn't promising a future of soft guitar strums and no dance anthems.

"THE UK IS IN THIS WEIRD WORLD OF RELIVING THE SAME THING OVER AND OVER, AND JUST HALLUCINATING NEW IDEAS"
HENRY REDCLIFFE

TO PROMOTE *BRITPOP*, Cook launched a TikTok account which he told fans would only be live for a month before being scrubbed from the internet, in an attempt to add something refreshingly ephemeral and gripping to the endless digital dustbin.

"TikTok has managed to destabilise something that was already quite unstable anyway," he says of the app's impact on the music industry. "I'm not a native user of TikTok, but I'm interested by this chaotic influence on a noise becoming a hook. The Addison Rae remix of Charli's ['Von Dutch'] has ended up having the screaming part as the viral hook. That's almost a parody of what a TikTok sound or 'moment' can be. I'm not always completely inspired by the music industry, but I'm involved in some underdog way, and couldn't resist trying to pry open some of the weak links in this stuff."

He also launched the spoof website 'Witchfork', featuring articles such as "Why Caroline Polachek would rather have talons", and hosted a livestreamed Witchfork Music Festival. It shows an artist removed from the music industry mainstream, but simultaneously wanting to be involved in the conversation. "I exist in my own weird niche, and it's interesting working out how this music can survive up against all these huge new artists launching," he says. "I can't resist being in dialogue with the music industry."

As a reaction to how he believes the music industry has "decided to archive itself quite haphazardly", Cook is also currently deep in the process of archiving the PC Music catalogue. "I'm very aware of things being precarious, and this is me as a music fan not wanting to have to trawl the web for a deleted download of some track that was important to me. I care about it in a practical way, and we're being told that it's all fine even if there isn't a tangible way to get this stuff. People say that you can find anything online, but have you ever tried to actually Google anything that you know about? Chances are there's a crappy JPEG and a brief description. It's sad that everyone has to put so much effort into doing it themselves, but the ecosystem is terribly organised. That was a big motivator for it."

THE NEXT TIME I meet Cook, he is in the middle of the second of three residencies to launch *Britpop*. The residency began in Los Angeles with a three-night run at the Viper Room, before hitting London for a trio of gigs at Camden punk institution The Underworld. It will end with another three gigs at New York DIY venue Trans-Pecos, leaning further into the rock-orientated energy of *Britpop* and taking Cook outside of his traditional comfort zone.

"Having an album in three parts lends itself to a live show with this many dynamics," Cook tells me from a pub opposite The Underworld before the third and final show at the venue. "With the way that streaming has evolved, I want to do whatever I can to transcend that." At the show later that night, these opposing forces are strikingly apparent. The gig begins with a giant slab of industrial electronic noise, which then abruptly stops, and Cook straps on an electric guitar to croon his way through highlights from Present on the new album.

It also feels like his arrival as a star in his own right. Often seen behind a mixing desk or in the shadows at a PC Music showcase, these new live gigs have Cook jovially joking with the crowd between songs and making gags at his own expense. During the songs, he dances with abandon through a beefed-up remix of 'Britpop' and has lighters in the air for the gorgeous and stripped-back 'Being Harsh'. Though the crowd are most energetic and fervent for the set's more electronic parts, they also warm to Cook's softer, guitar-based persona, enjoying the personable and chatty feel of the gig. If *Britpop* as an album is him repositioning himself at the end of the PC Music era, this is the real-life manifestation.

Though the collection of new songs is already a rich and extensive world across its 24 tracks, Cook is set to enhance and extend the universe on a series of supplementary music, featuring remixes and new versions of tracks from the album. "I like having the ability of re-doing a disc two [Present] song in the style of disc one [Past] or three [Future]. These categories make that idea quite irresistible to me," he smiles.

"I've always felt really deeply about avoiding the middle ground," says Cook, visibly excited about the prospect of a singer-songwriter fan digging Present and then finding themselves surprisingly drawn to Past's club music or vice versa. "It's so interesting to provoke someone into listening to something they didn't think they would like, and I love when things are repelling but interesting enough to make you come back to them. There's such a deluge of music now, and things can only really exist if they have some distance or friction. Otherwise, it's just another drop in the ocean."

NASSERI

SHABAKA'S NEW CALLING

"If I was still playing the sax, it'd be so easy," the former Sons of Kemet and The Comet is Coming bandleader Shabaka Hutchings admits. On stunning debut album *Perceive Its Beauty, Acknowledge Its Grace*, he turns to the flute and follows a spiritual compulsion to take a new path

BY WILL RICHARDS

On New Year's Day 2023, Shabaka Hutchings shared a message with fans, revealing that last year would see his final performances on the saxophone, the instrument on which he made his name. "I look forward to approaching each remaining show I do on it this year with the magic and intensity which a spirit of closure and intention can bring to musical proceedings," he wrote at the time.

Through his bands Sons of Kemet, The Comet is Coming, and Shabaka and the Ancestors, the musician became a figurehead for a London jazz scene revered across the globe, picking up Mercury Prize nominations and universal critical acclaim. His superbly energetic playing turned jazz gigs into dance parties and ushered in a new era of wider appreciation for the genre in Britain.

Hints at this sea change had come a few months earlier, in November 2022, when Shabaka released the EP *Afrikan Culture* under his own name. It saw him playing the flute, clarinet and more in a shift from rhythmic jazz to something spacier and more New Age.

Followers on social media will have also seen Shabaka – who now performs solely under his first name – sharing videos of himself playing a wide range of flutes and woodwind instruments across the world, often performed in nature. Last month, he released his debut solo album, *Perceive Its Beauty, Acknowledge Its Grace*, a gorgeous continuation of this sound and the first window into the future of a trailblazing artist.

Speaking from Tennessee after periods of time spent practising and further exploring the worlds and history of the flute in Barbados and Brazil, Hutchings said he felt he owed it to his fans to announce the forthcoming end of his time on the saxophone. "I felt a duty to let people know," he says. "I don't like it when artists make these long-term decisions and don't give anyone a heads-up. You read about it retrospectively and say, 'Oh, I wish I could have seen my favourite band one last time.'"

What followed was a frenzied and electrically charged final year of gigs with both Sons of Kemet and The Comet is Coming. "Something profound happens when you know the end is coming. There was this feeling of expectation and conclusion around every show," he explains. "The last three Sons of Kemet gigs are the best shows of my life, in terms of that mythical feeling of giving everything that you can. That's what you assume you're supposed to be doing in music every time you go on stage. I realised in those shows that I had no idea what that meant, and you can't know what that means until you get to a situation where you're confronted with the fact that the next three gigs are the last time you are going to play this music."

It also made him think of his heroes, he explains. "I thought, 'This is what [it] must have been like for The Miles Davis Quintet or John Coltrane's group.' This is what they must have been experiencing every night in terms of that energy and a profound level of listening and deep musical interaction."

Two of Shabaka's final performances on the saxophone also nodded perfectly to the past and present of the instrument and the genre. His final gig came in London in December, where he performed the John Coltrane classic *A Love Supreme* in its entirety. A few months earlier, he had joined Floating Points for a one-off performance of his hugely acclaimed album *Promises* at the Hollywood Bowl. Shabaka played the parts of the legendary Pharoah Sanders, who had passed away a year earlier.

"I thought it was important to end the period of the saxophone with something that was actually personally very important to me," he says of choosing *A Love Supreme* as his farewell performance. "That record is one of my really

PHOTOGRAPHY: ATIBAPHOTO

important records, and a good way to conclude my sojourn with the saxophone for this period of my life."

Perceive Its Beauty, Acknowledge Its Grace is a beautifully constructed album centred around the flute. For its recording, Shabaka brought in a stellar cast of collaborators including André 3000, Floating Points, Lianne La Havas and Moses Sumney. He says it's a continuation of the mood and message started on *Afrikan Culture*, and its title is meant to be read as a continuation of the EP: *Afrikan Culture, Perceive Its Beauty, Acknowledge Its Grace*.

To record it, Shabaka gathered the cast of musicians in the Van Gelder Studio in New Jersey, a place steeped in jazz history. He wanted to instil an improvisational spirit into the recordings and insisted that his collaborators didn't wear headphones. "I just told everyone, 'You've got to listen to me and be able to hear the flute.' It's uncomfortable, and the flute isn't particularly made to be played loud. It's meant to express resonance capacity most effectively, but not give a bunch of volume. That level of deep listening was really present."

> "It was important to end the period of the saxophone with something that was personally very important to me"

By his own admission, he is still learning on the flute and has a significant way to go before he would consider himself a master, like many believed he was of the saxophone. For the musician, documenting this process on record is an important part of moving forwards artistically and tracking the creative journey. It also arrives at a time of wider acknowledgement of the instrument, given the surprise curveball release of André 3000's *New Blue Sun* last year, an album Shabaka was involved in sessions for.

"Sometimes, it's the best that you can give, but you only realise that when you gain more proficiency," he says of documenting this period of his journey on the flute. "I realised this as well on the sax. The great thing about being a professional musician and then starting from scratch is that you realise the things you need to treasure. One of those things is that exploratory spirit that you have when you haven't really got your shit together yet."

In an era of financial uncertainty for recording artists and touring musicians, Shabaka's decision to hang up the instrument that made him the poster boy for a new generation of British jazz is a brave one. In switching instruments, he says he was answering a call from within against better logistical judgement.

"If I was still playing the sax, it'd be so easy," he admits. "The bands I was touring with, there was lots of demand, and I can really play that instrument." Despite this, he says he defines an artist as "someone that's constantly trying to align the inner feelings with the outer expression. How you feel is sometimes different from what's the most profitable. We might make very effective music, but if that's not lined with complete integrity, it means that a potential capacity isn't going to be realised."

It also aligns with his belief in the purpose of art at large and this spiritual compulsion to start afresh. "With the world coming to this place of general tension and confusion, the only thing we can do as artists is try to be as sensitive to how we feel [as possible] and go with what our hearts are telling us," says Shabaka. "Even if things fall flat on your face, you try it and you learn the lesson. The lesson makes you stronger and deeper. That can't happen if you don't do what's in your heart."

SONGS OF LIFE AND DEATH

Instead of exploring different personas as she has done in the past, St. Vincent's latest album, *All Born Screaming*, is the result of a period of introspection and personal loss

BY NICK REILLY

ALEX DA CORTE

ALEX DA CORTE

‘We forget that the suffering and beauty is all part and parcel of the same thing, and I don’t know if you get one without the other,”

ST. VINCENT TELLS Rolling Stone UK from her New York home. “If you lose someone, you suffer in equal measure to how much you loved. There’s no way around it: you’ve got to go through it.”

It’s a particularly profound point to hit on, but one that makes sense when you’re chatting about *All Born Screaming*, the latest album from the guitar virtuoso born Annie Clark. As that title suggests, it’s a reflection of life’s eternally chaotic nature, and the harsh pay-offs we accept as the price of joy. Grief and sadness, for Clark, have been but two of these.

In turn, it’s arguably the closest we’ve ever got to exploring who Annie Clark *is* in the here and now. Before now, personas and alter-egos had formed a huge part of Clark’s work. Her last album – the personal *Daddy’s Home* – saw her channel “Nastassja Kinski in *Paris, Texas* through a Tarantino lens”, while 2017’s *Masseduction* saw her explore the idea of a “mental institution dominatrix”.

But *All Born Screaming* is a deeply honest reflection of life, death and Clark’s own experiences of grief. It’s a record of two halves: the first leans heavily on Clark’s generational guitar-playing to deliver some of the biggest riffs of her career so far. The second, meanwhile, is a more sedate and subtle affair. It’s the duality of life, as Clark puts it. Life can be tough, but, as the acclaimed singer reminds us, we only get one of them.

Hello, Annie! Where do we find you?
I’m in bed in New York City. I flew in on a red-eye from LA a couple of nights ago, and people don’t want to talk about the jet lag from that journey. The three-hour time difference: it’s under-represented! It’s kind of something and it’s the black sheep of the jet-lag community. So, between the red-eye and landing and doing press all day yesterday, I accidentally overslept and missed my first interview today – I never do that!

I feel like you’re forgiven, given that hectic schedule.
We’ll see. Only God will tell. But I’m fucking ripping through these in bed, which is nice.

And only weeks away from the release of *All Born Screaming*. Are you excited to have it out in the wild?
It’s funny because the whole thing is this idea of finishing it, and then you go ‘OK, this is the best rendering of this vision that I can possibly make.’ And then you just spend a long time talking about it, which is sort of a hilarious disconnect from the music itself. Once it comes out, I feel, in a certain way, I’m done because it’s not for me anymore. I mean that in the best way it’s for everybody else, and they bring their own lives to it, and the listener can complete the song.

What’s your relationship like with explaining the creation of your music.

It can sometimes be an uneasy thing for artists?
I do feel very strongly now that I don’t want to say too much about a song. Not because I’m trying to be cagey and elusive, but because I want a listener to hear it and [for it to] mean anything it means to them. I don’t need to knock on their door when they’re enjoying something and say, “Actually, you’re not enjoying it!” That’s not what this is about, and that would feel ungenerous to me. The whole thing is mysterious to me, too. I don’t know where songs come from, how they emerge. I just go in my studio and work and work until a song reveals itself to me.

I’m writing about what’s going on in my life and whatever this psychic antenna we have as artists picked up. That’s why I’m trying to make something that takes chaos and violence and brutality and helps me make sense of my life. It is a funny construct to then just go let me talk about it, when I don’t know what it sometimes is!

What do you think is the resounding story of this record?
It’s a record about life and death and love, and it’s just very close to the bone and just close to my heart. It’s not a deconstruction of persona or anything like that; it’s just me.

That’s interesting, given the amount of personas that have existed in your music before.
Look, on my last album I was trying to channel Gena Rowlands in *A Woman Under the Influence*, Nastassja Kinski in *Paris, Texas* through a Tarantino lens. I’ve been interested with playing with persona on past albums, and that makes all the sense in the world to me because I’m queer. I know how to code-switch; I’ve been playing with identity since I was a child – of course this was gonna come out in my work. And it was a way for me at the time to get to the truth.

But that’s not what this record is about.

It's about life and death and love. I think it would be simplistic to say I did characters, but now I'm really me. First of all, that's reductive of the art, and it represents what was going on in my life. I'm careful not to cast aspersions on my previous work. That was authentic, and this is authentic, too.

It's an album of two halves. The first doesn't relent with its intensity and heavy guitars, whereas the second is a calmer proposition altogether.

Yeah, the first half is a bit of a season in hell, and I think it deals with grief, self-loathing, internal and external violence and saying life is impossible. The second half, to me, says yes, life *is* impossible but we get to live it, and we've only got one of them. Life is very short. I'm keenly aware of that, now more than ever.

It ends on 'All Born Screaming', too. An ecstatic mantra, we are all in this together. We forget that the suffering and beauty is all part and parcel of the same thing in life, and I don't know if you get one without the other. If you lose someone, you suffer in equal measure to how much you loved. There's no way around it: you've got to go through it.

This sounds like a very specific experience of grief that you've been through.

Well, every song is lived experience, and in the past few years I've lost people young and old, and there's no fucking rhyme or reason to it. And in a certain way, that grief is very clarifying because it makes you go, 'This matters and this doesn't matter at all.' I'm just going to focus on what matters. That's universal, though, isn't it? Everyone has that experience of crossing the rubicon; we all do.

You mentioned earlier about getting to live one life. It's an optimistic mindset. Have you always been like that?

I don't know, there have definitely been certain times in my life where I was so clouded by nerves that I probably couldn't see the light, and there's been various times of real darkness, personally. But I think making work that you love and that you believe in? That's my faith, that's my religion, and music has saved me on many occasions. Because even if I was personally shattered, I had this place to go with it, and I had this thing to make that I was compelled to make. Making things is an act of hope and an act of optimism. At this moment in my life, I'm an optimist with an asterisk. In the big picture, there are some things better than they've ever been. Even just being a musician and talking to you about this process. Seventy years ago, I'd have probably been a housewife. There's a lot of things that are the same as they ever were. The only new thing left for us to experience on this planet would be peace.

One song that really struck me on the album was 'Violent Times'. It sounds like a Bond theme, Annie.

Absolutely! It was not intentional when I was writing the song whatsoever, but I have noticed that, and yeah, I totally hear it.

If Barbara Broccoli came calling and asked you to do the next Bond theme, would you go for it?

Hell, yeah! I love those movies. Can we just put 'Violent Times' in there as the song? Stick it straight in because if she's reading this it'll save me a hell of a lot of work.

'Sweetest Fruit' floored me. It's a really profound tribute to the late, great, taken-too-soon producer SOPHIE.

I was a fan of SOPHIE's from afar, but we never met. I didn't set out to write this tribute in the same way I never set out to write anything, you know? It just sort of comes. But that song was the extended product of a jam session, and I loved that we could make a song around that. I read about the circumstances of her death, and it was so tragic, but this idea that she was an artist who was always reaching for new things and taking risks, right? And this idea that she was just trying to get a better look at the moon. That moved me because there are a lot of us in human history, people looking for something on that outer reaches. There's that Leonard Cohen line: "*I came so far for beauty*," and maybe it doesn't pan out, but it's a noble act to go out on a limb to try and find something really beautiful. It's such a fraught territory, and I didn't necessarily want to mention it was for her because it could get twisted and turned into something ugly. As artists, you can feel a camaraderie with artists if you like their work, even if you don't know them. And I like this idea that we're all fighting the same fight; we're all part of the same army, so when you see somebody go down, it's very heartbreaking.

"Life is very short. I'm aware of that"

And finally, this is your first album to be solely self-produced. How does that change your relationship with the songs?

I started recording myself when I was 14. Every record I've ever made I've co-produced, I've had the technological knowledge to get in there and do what I wanted. But in this case, sound is meaning, and a lot of these songs didn't necessarily start from a melody or a lyric, they started from sound. I was in my studio, over-caffeinated, micro-dosing on mushrooms and making sounds with modular synths and analog drum machines and just jamming, just finding sounds that I thought were exciting. I will forever love people like J Dilla or dub masters like Lee 'Scratch' Perry and King Tubby. That kind of production that is so tactile is just so sexy to me. I played with sound for hours, I jammed, and maybe only four seconds was something I could build a song around, and that's how 'Broken Man' came about, but sound really does have meaning. ®

ALEX DA CORTE

“I HAD TO GET OUT OF THIS DOOM HOLE”

After breaking every record imaginable with mega-hit ‘Heat Waves’, Glass Animals’ Dave Bayley came back down to earth with a bump. Fourth album I Love You So F***ing Much *sees him sift through the existential wreckage and focus on the fundamentals* BY WILL RICHARDS

ANIMAL MAGIC
(From left) Dave Bayley, Drew MacFarlane, Edmund Irwin-Singer and Joe Seaward

GLASS ANIMALS' DAVE Bayley is a few minutes late for our video call but has a better excuse than most. "Sorry, there was an earthquake," he says with half a smile from his Manhattan hotel room, moments after a 4.8-magnitude tremor rippled across New Jersey and into the city in early April.

Bayley has a strange ability to summon the elements. During a show at the legendary Red Rocks in Colorado back in 2017, he sang the lyrics "*my thunder shook him down*" from 'The Other Side of Paradise' at the exact moment thunder and lightning exploded in the sky in a coincidence genuinely too good to script. Suitably, the band's fourth album, *I Love You So F***ing Much*, was also concocted during an ungodly storm.

In April 2023, the band's singer and producer was in Los Angeles for writing sessions to create a follow-up for the band's 2020 album, *Dreamland*, before a positive COVID test left him stranded in a hilltop AirBnB for a fortnight. Then a mighty storm arrived.

"The house was shaking in the wind," he remembers. "I was wondering why the place was so cheap... and I got there, and it all clicked! I thought I could handle it, but when the rain came, it was a lot. The roads were flooded, and I would have had to walk down the mountain to safety. I just couldn't hack it."

In those two weeks, Bayley wrote the entirety of *I Love You So F***ing Much*, an album that dives into the core of the human condition, completely alone. "I was in this really weird existential place, and I saw the hope," he says. "I had to get out of this doom hole. I was looking out over the valley in Los Angeles, and I saw the couples and families walking around. People laughing, people crying. It was like I was in space looking down. I felt like that is actually where we need to be putting our focus – down there."

The creation of the new album came at the end of a transformative and hugely disorientating few years for Glass Animals. After releasing *Dreamland* in the first summer of the pandemic, the band headed off on a huge tour of the United States, one of the first of its kind in the new world.

"It was a beautiful rollercoaster ride that dumped us out the other end," Bayley reflects of the journey. "I felt like I was spectating the whole time. Even when the pandemic ended, we still weren't allowed out into the real world because there was no insurance against COVID. If you missed five shows, you're done. You're bankrupt." Such was the sense of being the canaries in the pandemic coal mine, Bayley and his manager ended up writing a manual for how to navigate touring during COVID for the bands that followed.

He remembers, "It was off the bus, onto the stage, back onto the bus. We'd see these huge flashes of joy during the show but then be right back down into our bubble. It was surreal and added to a real feeling of detachment. I think that was the beginning of the crisis."

While their unique, knife-edge tour was happening, the band's song 'Heat Waves' also completely exploded, becoming the first song by a British act to spend five weeks at the top of the Billboard 100 chart since the Spice Girls' 'Wannabe' in 1995. To date, it is the longest-charting song in Billboard 100 history at a staggering 91 weeks. It led to a Best New Artist nomination at the 2022 GRAMMYs, a night Bayley was cruelly unable to attend due to another positive COVID test.

Bayley had always written and produced Glass Animals material alone, but the overwhelming success of 'Heat Waves' saw him become an increasingly desirable collaborator for others, with external musicians also wanting to get involved in his band's work. Bayley worked alongside Jack Antonoff on Florence + The Machine's 2022 album *Dance Fever* and had been involved in multiple writing and production sessions with others for his own band's fourth album.

"A lot of people were getting in touch and wanting to help produce this record, and I did all that for a bit, but I'm not sure it was very 'me'," he says now. "I was going into the sessions very open-minded, but it didn't really get anywhere. I learned so much, and worked with some geniuses, but it didn't feel right for a Glass Animals project.

> *"People were pushing me to do sessions, but I'm quite introverted. When it comes to writing songs for Glass Animals, that's the natural space to do it – alone"*

"When I was in this house, and I was sick and forced to be alone, it dawned on me," Bayley remembers, telling himself, "It's actually OK – you don't have to do all the things that everyone thinks that you should do. People were pushing me to do these sessions, but I'm quite an introverted person. When it comes to writing songs for Glass Animals, that's the natural space to do it – alone."

After the album was written in demo form, Bayley took the songs back to his London studio and worked in a more structured way after his hyper-productive but manic two weeks in California. "The good songs happen fast," he says. "What then really needed to happen was to get out of that mad frenzy and into a place where I could make sense of it all."

The album's first teaser is 'Creatures in Heaven', a song that pairs Glass Animals' traditional wonky charm with the crunch of distorted guitars and Bayley's new perspective. "The backdrop of the record is about space, and this existential crisis is framing the whole thing, with these really intimate love stories at the core," he explains. "The contrast is meant to be an argument between the two. That led to a lot of the sounds being very different, with some space-y sounds and heavy guitars put through 70s-style phasers. It was all made on stuff that was meant to sound like the future in the 60s and 70s."

On the new single, Bayley tells a decades-old story and of longing to "be in the moment", something that proves hard for any touring musician, let alone one subjected to the whiplash-like sensation of being on the road during COVID. "The intention of the song is to argue that a tiny moment can be as complex and as interesting and as huge as everything else," he says. "A one-second event can change your life forever, and this moment can have a knock-on effect on other people's lives.

"The complexity of the emotions in that moment, it's impossible to comprehend at the time," Bayley adds, putting his new breakthroughs down to the simple fact of growing up as well as finding himself – not by design – in a feverish state and a crumbling house during a huge storm. *I Love You So F***ing Much* tackles the manic past few years of his life but goes far deeper too, right down to the fundamentals. "I was forced into isolation," he says. "That's the place where you can start to make connections." RS

PHOTOGRAPHY: LILLIE EIGER

JACKET BY SHAG, NECKLACE BY PIECES OF EIGHT GALLERY, GLASSES BY EYE ST

THE GREAT GADSBY

Comedy's *enfant terrible* Hannah Gadsby is relishing their anti-hero era

BY **JENNY VALENTISH**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
CHARLIE ASHFIELD

WE'RE ON our way to the photographic studio with Hannah Gadsby, their wife Jenney Shamash and their needy new pup Nuna in the backseat. Also with them is a gigantic bag containing tea, a teapot and a tea cup that goes everywhere they do.

Things have been surreal in Gadsbyland for the past five years. Since their Netflix special *Nanette* went interstellar in 2018, the comedian has had two further specials – *Douglas* (2020) and *Something Special* (2023) – and two world tours that bookended the pandemic. They published a memoir – *10 Steps to Nanette* – that was a decade in the writing, gave a TED Talk, graced the cover of *Variety* and became headline fodder for their views.

Finally, the *Nanette* phase has come to a close. Which begs the existential question: where to now?

"This interview has happened at the perfect time because I've barely spoken in two weeks," Gadsby says, looking to Shamash for confirmation. As Gadsby's producer and wife, Shamash gently nudges entertainingly derailed conversations back on track. "I usually approach interviews with, let's just see what they get on the day. But I prepared for this. In a sense, I'm learning how to be a professional."

The Rolling Stone interview takes place at the headquarters of Token, a leading comedy agency in Australia. As is the case in the car, the air con is set to arctic, to peak Gadsby comfort conditions.

That's good. Last time I interviewed them, in 2018, it was in a crowded café with a conveyor belt of journalists. For an autistic person, this promo set-up was less than ideal. One woman stopped at the table to offer her praise, then touched the arm of Gadsby, who seemed to hunch over in the booth one millimetre more.

"Are you *OK*?" the woman asked. Strange question, but actually, such concern was commonplace from anyone who'd seen the visceral *Nanette*, which zeroed in on an assault Gadsby had experienced. Do understand, though, that whatever you see Gadsby deliver, they've spent a good few years processing it before spitting it out as a devastating set.

"Now I don't have to do interviews in cafes – they come here," Gadsby says, wryly gesturing at the boardroom table, laden with tea accoutrements. "People might think of that as diva behaviour, but ultimately it's people who are sucked into the machine trying to create a bubble of safety for themselves. Success has helped my management of autism to the point where I'm really fine for the first time in my life. Money buys access."

Gadsby's career kicked off in 2006, long before they were diagnosed. That year, the Tasmanian comedian won the finals of Raw Comedy, at the age of 28, with a set that mocked their own body shape as soundly as their hometown of Smithton. For much of their career, they were the butt of their own jokes. Gadsby came of age when gay law reform was a heated topic in Tasmania, doing damage to marginalised people the way the same-sex marriage bill and the Voice Referendum would years later. All this fostered a dislike of gatekeepers that's been a constant in their work.

WHEN *Nanette* became a global talking point, with haters declaring it 'not comedy', Gadsby was catapulted out of their reasonably safe bubble of Melbourne audiences and comedy festivals, and developed a high-profile, dysfunctional relationship with Netflix that persists to this day – almost unbelievably.

In 2021, Netflix faced backlash for transphobic comments made by Dave Chappelle in his special *The Closer*. CEO Ted Sarandos sent an internal memo, leaked to *The Daily Beast*, that protested: "We are working hard to ensure marginalised communities aren't defined by a single story. So we have *Sex Education*, *Orange is the New Black*, *Control Z*, Hannah Gadsby and Dave Chappelle all on Netflix..."

Gadsby took a box of matches to the bridge Sarandos probably thought he was building, addressing him in an Instagram post. In part: "[...] I would prefer if you didn't drag my name into your mess... You didn't pay me nearly enough to deal with the real-world consequences

> “Success has helped my management of autism to the point where I’m really fine for the first time in my life

TRENCH BY BURBERRY, SHIRT BY INFORMALE, TIE BY SHAG, RING BY BURBERRY

of the hate speech dog-whistling you refuse to acknowledge, Ted. Fuck you and your amoral algorithm cult…"

To this, Chappelle added that he'd be willing to meet with the transgender community on three conditions, one of which was "you must admit that Hannah Gadsby is not funny".

The next year, Netflix released Ricky Gervais's *SuperNature*, also accused of having transphobic and homophobic content. Gadsby dismissed him as not being "a nuanced thinker". Since then, the three comedians' Netflix specials have continued to awkwardly overlap. In 2024, we've seen new releases from Chappelle and Gervais (whose continued obsession with cancel culture is cannibalising itself), with Gadsby's pertinently named new special out now: *Hannah Gadsby's Gender Agenda*.

"I had to be intentional about what I did," Gadsby says, of accepting Netflix's invitation to come back. "I figured, if I don't continue, then I'm just taking myself out of the conversation. So along with getting a deal for *Something Special*, we attached a special of gender-queer artists."

Hannah Gadsby's Gender Agenda has sets from DeAnne Smith, Chloe Petts, Jes Tom and Dahlia Belle. Gadsby has a presence between sets, to "dangle the bait".

"The few of us with a platform – you know, Wanda Sykes and Mae Martin – we're trying to push back against this new wave of phobia. It's a different landscape to what I grew up in, so I can't give people actual advice on how to navigate this scene. The only way I can help is to give them a platform."

March and April, it turns out, were big months. Gadsby performed a new show, *Woof!*, at the 2024 Melbourne Comedy Festival following its run in Sydney. Gadsby will perform it at the Edinburgh Festival in August, and at The London Palladium in November.

"*Woof!* is not a logical step from [previous live show] *Banana Palace*," Gadsby says. "It's many odd steps in many different directions. Let's just say the theme is anxiety. I try to be relatable. You know?"

Gadsby also appeared in the final season of Netflix hit *Sex Education*, as radio station boss Celia. Previously, they'd acted in *Underbelly*, *Please Like Me* and *The Librarians*, but this was a more formidable prospect, particularly alongside Gillian Anderson – "not a bucket of hugs, at first".

"I was terrified I was gonna ruin it," Gadsby says. "I found myself playing to the room instead of to the script. Like, 'I'm going to make the camera-man laugh.' So I had to dial that back."

Gadsby became a favourite with US talk-show giants, and duly bit the hand that feeds at *The Hollywood Reporter*'s Women in Entertainment Gala. They used the opportunity to lampoon hosts who – at the peak of the Me Too movement – were keen to give their good-guy takes on bad guys.

"It's a strange world," Gadsby says of celebrity. "As somebody who's barely got a grasp on normal life, I'm way out of my depth. Who do you trust? I take things at face value, which is not how you approach Hollywood. But they *are* nice. Like, it's not slimy. They just over-promise and under-deliver; that's the business model."

One reliable constant has been Shamash. Amid the chaos of 2021, the pair married in Gadsby's front garden in regional Victoria. They'd met in New York on a trip to perform *Nanette*. As the story goes, Shamash was the first person Gadsby met when they got off the plane. The fact that Shamash had an advantage in having read Gadsby's memoir was not confronting, apparently.

"That's the dream," Gadsby declares. "The idea of dating is horrific to me because I'm really interested in other people, but I don't like talking about myself. Now I have a book, so it was: read that and then let's talk about you."

The romance was immortalised in 2021's live show *Body of Work* (aka *Something Special* on Netflix), a more feel-good show, right down to the colour palette. "Studies have shown that one of the most soothing ideas to a human eye is the receding skyline – the greens and blues of foreground, middle-ground and background skies," Gadsby says, chuffed someone noticed.

Gadsby has long exercised a duty of care to their audience, but I'm interested in how an artist can set their boundaries once their personal story has served as a lifeline. Their part in the transaction is surely done, but how can that be communicated to people who are in crisis, and who might want more?

"It's a really interesting question that I think about a lot. It's not inappropriate behaviour, so I don't want to make people feel that way. *Nanette* was quite traumatic so I still feel a sense of responsibility there. But also, I had to put some very strong boundaries down immediately. I struggle with interpersonal relationships. You've got to find the balance of processing the world that you're living in, without trying to be something for other people."

GADSBY is clumsy. There's been a litany of broken bones in their lifetime to back this up. But when they 'broke comedy', as they put it in their TED Talk, it couldn't have been more deliberate. And since then, they've taken a pickaxe to the art world.

"This is the first time I've spoken about it publicly," they say, practically cracking their knuckles.

In June 2023, It's Pablo-matic: Picasso According to Hannah Gadsby, opened at the Brooklyn Museum, to shock and horror. Now, Gadsby has a solid history of art criticism – live shows such as *The Exhibitionist*; a lecture series for the National Gallery of Victoria in Australia; and

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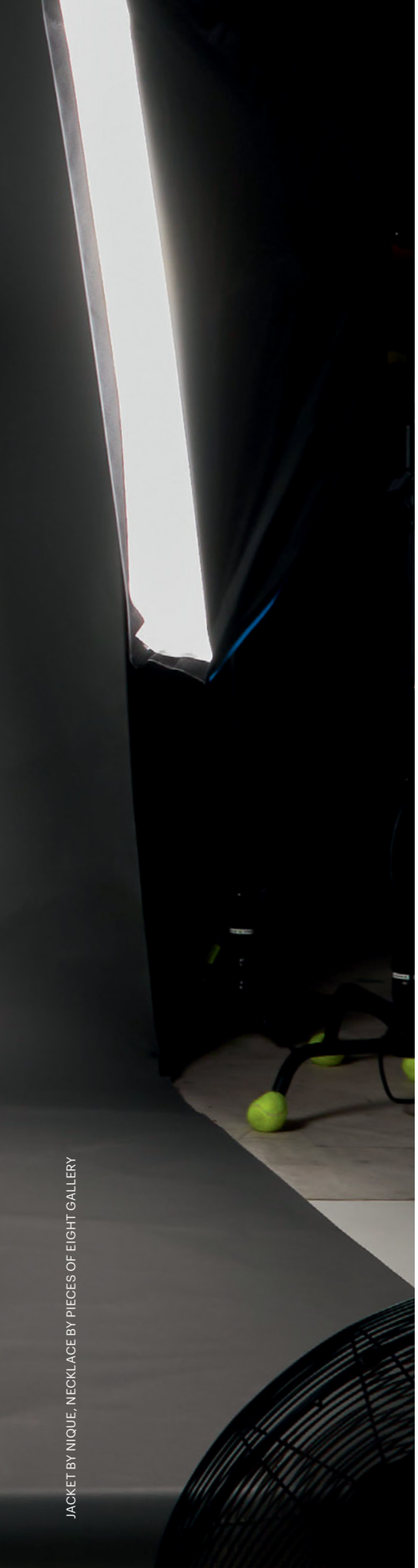
> It was my creative decision not to engage in the fallout that I deliberately manufactured. I played them like a fiddle

NECKLACE BY PIECES OF EIGHT GALLERY

> “I’ve gone in through the back door, and that’s what makes the art world angry



JACKET BY NIQUE, NECKLACE BY PIECES OF EIGHT GALLERY

Artscape and *Hannah Gadsby's Oz* for the ABC. But when they were invited by the Brooklyn Museum to curate a Picasso exhibition in June 2023, it was as a "noted Picasso hater", as *The Sydney Morning Herald* put it in a scathing review.

Picasso has been living rent-free in Gadsby's head since their teens, when they wondered why he was such "a cult". He was practically the Taylor Swift of manufacturing his own fame, they note. Years later, when Annie Leibovitz shot Gadsby for the 2018 *Vanity Fair* Hall of Fame, they used Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein as inspiration.

"I studied art history at university. That was fucking decades ago," Gadsby says. "I went in as a comedian, and that's how I was going to play it. I had my own artwork in the exhibition. That's funny to me."

Gadsby thinks they were approached by the Brooklyn Museum because the institution is itself plagued by snobbery. "The accusation from the elite is that they pander to the popular. I was approached as a pot stirrer. I've gone in through the back door, and that's what makes the art world angry."

They determined not to centre Picasso, who Gadsby has long maligned as a misogynist and abuser, and so by the time the visitor reached the end, Picasso's works were entirely replaced by works from feminist artists.

"I like to destabilise things. So there was proper historical information and then my contribution, which was dick jokes; like in the audio tour I was calling him PP. I emasculated Picasso – and not sophisticatedly. Because there's an element of that in Picasso's own work."

Hostile reviews and think-pieces came in thick and fast, but Gadsby didn't read them. Gadsby becomes fiercely animated, like a villain outlining the sheer genius of their masterplan.

"I wasn't going to invest in that controversy, which would have been the PR smart thing, because all you have to do to be successful now is to harvest notoriety. But my artwork was finished. It was my creative decision not to engage in the fallout that I deliberately manufactured. Nobody seems to want to acknowledge that. I played them like a fiddle. And the purpose of that was basically I'm just saying, 'You're stupid'. It's basic. It's a schoolyard tactic. And you know what the art world did? They said, '*You're* stupid.'" Gadsby flashes a triumphant look. "Yeah, I'm a comedian. What's your fucking excuse?"

So where to now? Gadsby isn't entirely sure – nor sure of who their audience even is anymore – but they've been putting some safeguards in place. For the sake of their sanity, they've learned to see Brand Hannah – the version in the public eye – as a team project. They're dialling back autobiographical material to try and find a way of living "reasonably unconsciously" and they're trying to maintain a "cruising altitude", rather than dizzying highs and lows, to eliminate bad decision-making.

"I'm in a fairly enviable position, but it's very easy to look back on the last five years and say, 'Perhaps I didn't make the most of my opportunity and perhaps I didn't play the game well enough,'" Gadsby says. "And then I have to remind myself I *never* played the game. My career was built out of parallel play. With *Nanette*, it just so happened that the zeitgeist and my game that I was playing on my own connected."

To get back to that state of play, in December 2023 Gadsby booked a modest eight nights at the Arts Centre Melbourne to toy around with new ideas and reconnect with audiences. *Banana Palace* was not so much testing a new set as an experiment. Gadsby was reading Barbra Streisand's autobiography *My Name Is Barbra*, which quickly became a 'special interest' hyperfixation.

"So then I decided, with a week to go, that perhaps what I'll do is write letters to Barbra and read them on stage. I thought it would be the most vulnerable thing in the world to explore being in a parasocial relationship with Barbra Streisand – parasocial meaning she doesn't know. I thought, 'How interesting would it be if I performed my own parasocial relationship, in front of people who might possibly have a parasocial relationship with *me*.'"

Gadsby also recently took Shamash to Smithton, on the northwest coast of Tasmania, where they grew up as the youngest of five. The town hasn't yet erected a statue, but Gadsby was lifted to find the place transformed – particularly when they revisited their old school.

"I was ready to be triggered and scared, but then a girl I went to school with who works there now gave us a private tour. There were queer and transgender flags, and programmes in place for queer kids," Gadsby says. "It was really interesting. I feel like Tasmania is quite proud of me. I'm currently in some backlash waters, but that's not coming from home base."

Thinking back to the woman in the café who'd asked if they were OK, Gadsby says they've heard that question a lot in recent years – another wave after the Pablo-matic backlash.

"Yes, I'm fine," they say, "but I also don't quite understand my scale in the world. You know, there's a lot of people who hate me, and I do know that, but I forget the scale of it."

It's too tempting not to slip into the role of psych and ask: *And how does that feel?*

"Well, it keeps ya humble," they say amiably. "I don't want to be that person who's just going, 'Fuck the haters', because I'm doing that stuff deliberately and that tension is where the interesting stuff is. I just have to really think about what sort of life I want to lead – and I don't think I want to lead a very dynamic one, but I just seem to keep finding myself in very dynamic places, despite all my best intentions to quit and recede."

Fake photos, real harm: the fight against AI porn in the US

Deepfakes are easier to make than ever – and our sense of reality and democracy are at risk

By LORENA O'NEIL

AMERICAN POLITICIAN Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was in a car talking with her staff about legislation and casually scrolling through her X mentions when she saw the photo. It was the end of February, and after spending most of the week in Washington D.C., she was looking forward to flying down to Orlando to see her mum after a work event. But everything left her mind once she saw the picture: a digitally altered image of someone forcing her to put her mouth on their genitals. Adrenalin coursed through her, and her first thought was 'I need to get this off my screen.' She closed it, shaken.

"There's a shock to seeing images of yourself that someone could think are real," the congresswoman tells me. It's a few days after she saw the disturbing deepfake, and we're waiting for our food in a corner booth of a retro-style diner in Queens, New York, near her neighbourhood. She's friendly and animated throughout our conversation, maintaining eye contact and passionately responding to my questions. When she tells me this story, though, she slows down, takes more pauses and plays with the delicate rings on her right hand. "As a survivor of physical sexual assault, it adds a level of dysregulation," she says. "It resurfaces trauma, while I'm trying to– in the middle of a fucking meeting."

The violent picture stayed in Ocasio-Cortez's head all day.

"There are certain images that don't leave a person, they can't leave a person," she says. "It's not a question of mental strength or fortitude – this is about neuroscience and our biology." She tells me about scientific reports she's read about how it's difficult for our brains to separate visceral images on a phone from reality, even if we know they are fake. "It's not as imaginary as people want to make it seem. It has real, real effects not just on the people that are victimised by it, but on the people who see it and consume it.

"And once you've seen it, you've seen it," Ocasio-Cortez says. "It parallels the same exact intention of physical rape and sexual assault, [which] is about power, domination and humiliation. Deepfakes are absolutely a way of digitising violent humiliation against other people."

She hadn't publicly announced it yet, but she tells me about a new piece of legislation she's working on to end nonconsensual, sexually explicit deepfakes. Throughout our lunch, she keeps coming back to it – something real and concrete she could do so this doesn't happen to anyone else.

Deepfake porn is just one way artificial intelligence makes abuse easier, and the technology is getting better every day. From the moment Ocasio-Cortez won her primary in 2018, she's dealt with fake and manipulated images, whether through the use of Photoshop or generative AI. There are photos out there of her wearing swastikas; there are videos in which her voice has been cloned to say things she didn't say. Someone created an image of a fake tweet to make it look like Ocasio-Cortez was complaining that all of her shoes had been

PHOTOGRAPH IN ILLUSTRATION BY TOM WILLIAMS/CQ ROLL CALL/GETTY IMAGES

ILLUSTRATION BY **Matthieu Bourel**

THE FIGHTER Ocasio-Cortez is co-leading the effort to stop AI abuse

stolen during the Capitol Building insurrection on 6 January 2021. For months, people asked her about her lost shoes. These examples are in addition to countless fake nudes or sexually explicit images of her that can be found online, particularly on X.

Ocasio-Cortez is one of the most visible politicians in the US right now – and she's a young Latina woman up for reelection in 2024, which means she's on the front lines of a disturbing, unpredictable era of being a public figure. An overwhelming 96 per cent of deepfake videos are nonconsensual porn, all of which feature women, according to a recent study by the cybersecurity company DeepTrace Labs. And women who face multiple forms of discrimination, including women of colour, LGBTQ+ people, and women with disabilities, are at heightened risk to experience technology-facilitated gender-based violence, says a report from UN Women.

In 2023, more deepfake abuse videos were shared than in every other year in history combined, according to an analysis by independent researcher Genevieve Oh. What used to take skilful, tech-savvy experts hours to Photoshop can now be whipped up at a moment's notice with the help of an app. Some deepfake websites even offer tutorials on how to create AI pornography.

What happens if we don't get this under control? It will further blur the lines between what's real and what's not – as politics becomes more and more polarised. What will happen when voters can't separate truth from lies? And what are the stakes? As the US presidential election approaches, democracy itself could be at risk. And, as Ocasio-Cortez points out in our conversation, it's about much more than imaginary images.

"It's so important to me that people understand that this is not just a form of interpersonal violence, it's not just about the harm that's done to the victim," she says about nonconsensual deepfake porn. She puts down her spoon and leans forward. "Because this technology threatens to do it at scale – this is about class subjugation. It's a subjugation of entire people. And then when you do intersect that with abortion, when you do intersect that with debates over bodily autonomy, when you are able to actively subjugate all women in society on a scale of millions, at once digitally, it's a direct connection [with] taking their rights away."

She's at her most energised in these moments of our conversation, when she's emphasising how pervasive this problem is going to be, for so many people. She doesn't sound like a rehearsed politician spouting out sound bites. She sounds genuinely concerned – distressed, even – about how this technology will impact humanity.

Ocasio-Cortez is living through this nightmare as she fights it. She's watched her body, her voice, everything about herself distorted into a horror-film version of reality. It's deeply personal, but if she can figure out the antidote to help end this shape-shifting form of abuse, it could change how the rest of us experience the world.

BACK IN THE EARLY 2010S, before generative AI was widespread, abuse experts rang warning bells about altered images being used to intimidate communities online. Nighat Dad is a human-rights lawyer in Pakistan who runs a helpline for survivors being blackmailed using images, both real and manipulated. The consequences there are dire – Dad says some instances have resulted in honour killings by family members and people taking their own lives.

"This process has been going on for a while, and women of colour, feminists from the Global South have been raising this issue for so long and nobody paid any attention," Dad says.

In the US, Representative of New York's 9th District Yvette Clarke has tried for years to get Congress to act. In 2017, she began to notice how often Black women were harassed on social media, whether they were the targets of racist remarks or offensive, manipulated images. On the internet, bigotry is often more overt, where trolls feel safe hiding behind their screens.

"That's what really triggered me in terms of a deeper dive into how technology can be utilised overall to disrupt, interfere and harm vulnerable populations in particular," Clarke says.

At the time, the technology around deepfakes was still emerging, and she wanted to establish guardrails and get ahead of the harms, before they became prevalent.

"It was an uphill battle," Clarke says, noting that there weren't many people in Congress who had even heard of this technology, let alone were thinking of regulating it. Alongside Clarke, former senator of Nebraska Ben Sasse was an exception; he introduced a bill in December 2018, but it was short-lived. On the House side, the first congressional hearing on deepfakes and disinformation was in June 2019, timed with Clarke's bill, the DeepFakes Accountability Act. The legislation was an attempt to establish criminal penalties and provide legal recourse to deepfake victims. She reintroduced it in September 2023.

In May 2023, Representative of New York's 25th District Joe Morelle introduced the Preventing Deepfakes of Intimate Images Act, which would have criminalised the sharing of nonconsensual and sexually explicit deepfakes. Like previous deepfake legislation, it didn't pick up steam. Clarke says she thinks it's taken a while for Congress to understand just how serious and pervasive of an issue this is.

Now, finally, people are starting to pay attention to the dangers of all types of AI abuse. Clarke is vice

"It's so important to me that people understand that this is not just a form of interpersonal violence. This technology threatens to do it at scale – this is about class subjugation of entire people"

chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, which just announced the launch of an AI policy series that will look at this kind of technology through the lens of race. The series will address algorithmic bias in AI systems and will educate the public on misinformation, particularly in regard to disinformation campaigns against Black voters. And Clarke is a part of the House's new bipartisan task force on AI, alongside Ocasio-Cortez and 22 other members, plus the two leaders of the House.

"Thank God, folks have finally recognised that civil rights are being violated," Clarke says. "The work that we do now has implications not just for this generation, and not just for now, but for future generations. And that's why it's important that we act swiftly."

As the technology has advanced rapidly, so has the abuse. And as Clarke points out, the harm is no longer just focused on marginalised communities. It's become widespread, affecting teens and college students across the country. It can happen to anyone with a photograph online.

In May 2020, Taylor (who asked to use an alias to avoid further abuse) had just graduated from college and was quarantining with her boyfriend in New England when she received an odd email, with the subject line: "Fake account in your name." A former classmate of hers had written the email, which started out, "Look, this is a really weird email to write, but I thought you would want to know."

The classmate went on to tell Taylor he'd seen a fake Pornhub account of hers with her name and personal information on it. "It looks like they used a deepfake to put your face on top of some videos," he wrote.

Confused, Taylor decided it must be spam. She sent the classmate a message on Facebook saying, "Hey, I just want to let you know your account got hacked." No, he replied, it had been a genuine email.

Four years later, she recalls that she hadn't even known what a deepfake was at the time. She opened her boyfriend's computer and went to the Pornhub link her classmate messaged her. When the website loaded, she saw her face staring back at her in a sexually explicit video she'd never made.

"One of my big concerns is that we're just going to enter this post-truth world where nothing you see online is trustworthy because everything can be generated in a very realistic yet fake way," says Chowdhury

"It was surreal seeing my face ... especially the eyes," she tells me during a Zoom call. "They looked kind of dead inside ... like the deepfake looked realistic but it doesn't quite look like – it looks like me if I was spacing out."

She noticed the account had multiple videos posted on it, with photos taken from her Facebook and Instagram pages. And the videos already had thousands of views. She read the comments and realised some people thought the videos were real. Even scarier, the Pornhub profile had all of her very real personal information listed: her full name, her hometown, her university. (A spokesperson for Pornhub says nonconsensual deepfakes are banned from the site and that it has teams that review and remove the content once they are made aware of it.)

Taylor started diving deeper online and realised multiple fake accounts with videos had been made in her name, on various sites.

Suddenly, Taylor realised why she'd seen an uptick in messages on all of her social media accounts the past few weeks. She immediately felt very concerned about her physical safety.

"I had no idea if the person who did it was near me location-wise, [or] if they were going to do anything else to me," Taylor says. "I had no idea if anyone who saw that video was going to try to find me. I was very physically vulnerable at that point."

She and her boyfriend called the local police, who didn't provide much assistance. Taylor played phone tag with a detective who told her, "I really have to examine these profiles," which creeped her out. Eventually, she says, he told her that this was technically legal, and whoever did it had a right to.

It was the first few months of Covid, and Taylor, who lives with anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder, says she'd already been facing a general sense of worry and paranoia, but this exacerbated everything. She got nervous when going out that a stranger would recognise her from the videos. She fixated on who in her life had seen them. On the verge of starting postgraduate study, she wondered if future employers would find them and if her career would be over before it had even started.

In the months that followed, Taylor discovered that a girl she knew from university had also had this happen to her. Through their conversations, they were able to pinpoint a guy they'd both had a falling-out with – a guy who happened to be very tech-savvy. As they continued to investigate, they came across multiple women from their college who'd been similarly targeted, all connected to this man they call Mike. But the state police were never able to prove he made the videos.

Taylor was one of the first to speak out about her AI abuse, anonymously sharing her story in the 2023 documentary *Another Body*. The filmmakers have started an organisation called #MyImageMyChoice to tackle intimate image abuse. In March, the organisers co-hosted a virtual summit on deepfake abuse, with legal experts, advocates and survivors like actor Sophia Bush telling their stories.

Taylor says that in the aftermath of that deepfake, she often feels out of control of her own life. She compensates for this by trying to be in control of other situations. She repeatedly locks her car to make sure that it's secure, and is often terrified the coffee pot is still on and her house is going to catch on fire. "I still deal with it today," she says of her heightened OCD.

Mike was interested in neural networks and machine learning, Taylor says, which is how she suspects he could have created the deepfake before there were easily accessible apps that did this instantaneously like there are now. According to #MyImageMyChoice, there are more than 290 deepfake porn apps (also known as nudify apps), 80 per cent of which have launched in the past year. Google Search drives 68 per cent of traffic to the sites.

One of the people Taylor's been connected to in the online abuse-advocacy space is Adam Dodge, the founder of the digital-safety education organisation EndTAB (Ending Tech-Enabled Abuse). Dodge tells me people often underestimate the extreme helplessness and disempowerment that comes with this form of tech-enabled trauma, because the abuse can feel inescapable.

For example, in revenge porn, when someone's intimate images are leaked by a partner, survivors often try to assert control by promising to never take pictures like that again. With a deepfake, there is no way to prevent it from happening because somebody can manifest that abuse whenever and wherever they want, at scale.

Dodge wants to reframe the conversation: instead of highlighting the phenomenon of new technology being able to create these hyperrealistic images, he wants to shift the focus to how this is creating an unprecedented amount of sexual-violence victims. He thinks that the more people are educated about this as a form of abuse, versus

OPPOSITE PAGE: KENT NISHIMURA/*LOS ANGELES TIMES*/GETTY IMAGES

as a harmless joke, the more it could help with prevention.

He brings up a recent New Jersey high school incident where someone made AI-generated nudes of female classmates. "The fact they were able to spin up these images so quickly on their phones with little to no tech expertise and engage in sexual violence and abuse at scale in their school is really worrisome."

RUMMAN CHOWDHURY IS no stranger to the horrors of online harassment; she was once the head of ethical AI at X, back when it was called Twitter and before Elon Musk decimated her department. She knows firsthand how difficult it is to control harassment campaigns, and also how marginalised groups are often disproportionately targeted on these platforms. She recently co-published a paper for UNESCO with research assistant Dhanya Lakshmi on ways generative AI will exacerbate what is referred to in the industry as technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

"In the paper, we actually demonstrate code-based examples of how easy it is for someone to not just create harassing images, but plan, schedule and coordinate an entire harassment campaign," says Chowdhury, who currently works at the State Department, serving as the US Science Envoy for AI, connecting policymakers, community organisers and industry with the goal of developing responsible AI.

Chowdhury rattles off ways people can use technology to help them make at-scale harassment campaigns. They can ask generative AI to not only write negative messages, but also to translate them into different languages, dialects or slang. They can use this information to create fake personas, so one person can target a politician and say that she's unqualified or ugly, but make it look like 10 people are saying it. They can use text-to-image models to alter pictures, which Chowdhury and Lakshmi did for their research, asking a program to dress one woman up like a jihadi soldier and changing another woman's shirt to say Blue Lives Matter. And they didn't have to trick or hack the model to generate these images.

And it's not just about generation, it's about amplification, which happens even when people aren't trying to be cruel. It's something Chowdhury often saw while working at X – people retweeting a fake photo or video, not knowing it's not real.

"People will inadvertently amplify misleading information all the time," Chowdhury says. "It is a very big problem and also one of the hardest problems to address because the individual did not have malicious intent. They saw something that looked realistic."

She says she thinks a lot of people have learned not to believe everything they read on the internet, but they don't have the same mental guard against video and audio. We tend to believe those are true, because it used to be difficult to fake them. Chowdhury says she doesn't know if we are all going to get better at identifying fake content, or if we will just stop trusting everything we see online.

"One of my big concerns is that we're just going to enter this post-truth world where nothing you see online is trustworthy, because everything can be generated in a very, very realistic yet fake way," Chowdhury tells me.

This is a human problem that needs a human solution. As Chowdhury points out, it's not an easy problem to solve, but it doesn't mean we shouldn't try to. She offers up a multiprong approach. Social media companies can track individual accounts to see if they are coordinating with other people, or whether the same IP address has multiple accounts. They can adjust the algorithms that drive what people are seeing. People can mobilise their own communities by talking about media literacy. Legislators can work on protections and regulations, and find protections that don't just put the onus on the survivor to take action. Generative-AI developers and the technology companies that platform them can be more transparent in their actions and more careful about what products they release to the public. (X didn't respond to a request for comment.)

Mary Anne Franks, a legal scholar specialising in free speech and online harassment, says it's entirely possible to craft legislation that prohibits harmful and false information without infringing on the First Amendment. "Parody and satire make clear that the information being presented is false – there is a clear line between mocking someone and pretending to be someone," she says.

"And while the Supreme Court has held that some false speech may be protected," she adds, "it has never held that there is a First Amendment right to intentionally engage in false speech that causes actual harm."

Franks wants to see legislation on deepfake-AI porn include a criminal component as well as a civil component, because, she says, people are more often fearful of going to jail versus fearful of getting sued about something so abstract and misunderstood.

"While it is true that the US is guilty of overcriminalising many kinds of conduct, we have the opposite problem when it comes to abuses disproportionately targeted at women and girls," Franks says, citing how domestic abuse, rape, and stalking are underprosecuted.

Online abuse disproportionately targets marginalised groups, but it also often affects women in public spaces, like journalists or politicians. Women at the intersection of these identities are particularly vulnerable.

DEVASTATION Ocasio-Cortez believes deepfake victims will take their own lives

Representative for Pennsylvania Summer Lee says she often thinks about how rapidly this technology is advancing, especially given the unprecedented levels of harassment public figures face on social media platforms.

"There is just such a fear that so many of us have, that there will be no mechanisms to protect us," Lee says. She says she already sees a world in which Black people and other

"When I think about women who will run [for office], especially Black and Brown women, we have to think about ways our images will be used and abused," says Lee

marginalised people are sceptical of the system following disinformation campaigns: "It makes voters and people who would otherwise run [for office] afraid that the system itself is untrustworthy. When I think about women who will run, especially Black and Brown women, we have to think about the ways in which our images will be used and abused. That is a constant fear of women, and particularly women of colour, who think about whether or not they want to put themselves out on a limb to run for Congress.

"You lose control of yourself to an extent when you are putting yourself out there to run for office, but in this era, it takes on a new meaning of what it means to lose control of your image, of your personhood. The ways in which this technology can exploit and abuse it, how it can spread, it can ruin not just reputations but lives."

AT THE DELI, Ocasio-Cortez tells me something similar. We're talking about how real the harm is for the victims of this kind of abuse. "Kids are going to kill themselves over this," she says. "People are going to kill themselves over this."

I ask Ocasio-Cortez what she would tell a teenage girl who has been victimised by AI abuse. "First of all, I think it's important for her to know and what I want to tell her is that society has failed you," she says. "Someone did this to you and it's wrong, but society has failed you. People should not have the tools to do this.

"My main priority is making sure that she doesn't internalise it, that the crime is not complete," Ocasio-Cortez says. I ask her how she personally deals with it – is there something she does to avoid internalising the abuse?

"I think of it not as an on switch or an off switch," she says, adding that she often has young women asking her how it's so easy for her to speak up. "It's not," she tells me. She slows down again, choosing her words carefully. "I think of it as a discipline, a practice. It's like, 'How good am I going to be at this today?' Because some days I suck, some days I do internalise it, some days I don't speak up because things have gotten to me."

"Congress is spearheading this much-needed initiative to address gaps in our legal framework against digital exploitation… Together, we are combating this chilling new wave of abuse," says Mace

Ocasio-Cortez says that a lot of her politics are motivated by a sense of not wanting other people to experience the things that she or others have. "A lot of my work has to do with chain breaking, the cycle breaking, and this, to me, is a really, really, really important cycle to break," she says.

We talk about Taylor Swift's sexually explicit AI photos that went viral in January – she remembers being horrified when she heard about them. She'd already been working on the deepfake-AI legislation when it happened, but she says the Swift incident helped accelerate the timeline on the bipartisan, bicameral legislation. Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois and Senator Lindsey Graham from South Carolina are leading the Senate version of the bill, while Ocasio-Cortez leads the House version. It's called the Disrupt Explicit Forged Images and Non-Consensual Edits (DEFIANCE) Act of 2024. The legislation amends the Violence Against Women Act so that people can sue those who produce, distribute, or receive the deepfake pornography, if they "knew or recklessly disregarded" that the victim did not consent to those images.

The bill defines "digital forgeries" as images "created through the use of software, machine learning, artificial intelligence, or any other computer-generated or technological means to falsely appear to be authentic". Any digital forgeries that depict the victims "in the nude or engaged in sexually explicit conduct or sexual scenarios" would qualify. If the bill passes the House and Senate, it would become the first federal law to protect victims of deepfakes.

The bill has support from both sides of the aisle, bringing together unlikely partners. For example, Nancy Mace, Representative for South Carolina's 1st District, who has publicly feuded with Ocasio-Cortez in the past, is a co-sponsor of the DEFIANCE Act.

"Congress is spearheading this much-needed initiative to address gaps in our legal framework against digital exploitation," says a spokesperson for Mace, who recently introduced her own bill criminalising deepfake porn. "Together, we are combating this chilling new wave of abuse against women and confronting the alarming rise in deepfake child pornography. We aim to bring perpetrators to justice and ensure the safety and security of all individuals in the digital realm."

Durbin tells me he thinks the key to passing DEFIANCE into law is its significant bipartisan support.

"I really believe that politicians from both political parties and every political stripe are coming to the realisation that this is a real danger," he says, adding that having Ocasio-Cortez as a partner on the DEFIANCE Act is important.

"I'm saddened that she's gone through this experience personally," says Durbin. "But it certainly gives her credibility when she speaks to the issue."

At lunch, I ask Ocasio-Cortez if she thought the fact that she was the youngest woman to serve in Congress – and a woman of colour – has to do with why she's a lightning rod for this type of harassment.

"Absolutely," she says, without a moment's hesitation. I ask her why she thinks people often target women in leadership roles.

"They want to teach us a lesson for being there, for existing: this is not your place, and because you're here, we're going to punish you," she says.

We talk about fascinations people have with public figures, whether they're artists, influencers, or politicians.

"People increasingly, since the emergence of smartphones, have relied on the internet as a proxy for human experience," Ocasio-Cortez says. "And so if this becomes the primary medium through which people engage the world, at least in this country, then manipulating that becomes manipulating reality."

The fight for reality can sometimes feel futile. Facing the AI frontier, it's hard not to feel an undercurrent of dread. Are we entering a post-truth world where facts are elusive and society's most marginalised are only further abused? Or is there still time to navigate towards a better, more equitable future?

"There have been times in the past where I did have moments where I'm like, 'I don't know if I can survive this,'" Ocasio-Cortez says quietly. "And in those moments sometimes I remember, 'Yeah, that's the point. That is quite literally the point.' I was the youngest woman elected to Congress, and it took over 200 years for a woman in her twenties to get elected to Congress, when this country was founded by 25-year-old dudes! Do people think that's a fucking coincidence?"

She's back to being animated, and she seamlessly ties it back to her work: "It is by design, and even the AI represents – not AI in general, but this use of AI – the automation of that design. It's the automation of a society where you can have an entire country be founded by 25-year-old men, but it takes over 200 years for a 29-year-old woman to get elected to Congress. And then once she is elected, they do everything in their power to get her to leave."

She leans in and smiles.

"And guess what, motherfuckers? I'm not going anywhere. Deal with it."

OPPOSITE PAGE: ANNA MONEYMAKER/GETTY IMAGES

COUNTRY'S NEW COWBOY ERA

The Red Dirt scene is exploding with stars like Kaitlin Butts, Beyoncé's leading a cowboy-core revolution, and country songwriters are wrangling tough topics like opioids

Kaitlin Butts

The Red Dirt music of Texas and Oklahoma is booming right now. A theatre kid from Tulsa wants to bring it to the masses. *By* Marissa R. Moss

KAITLIN BUTTS is sitting in an East Nashville coffee shop, wondering if she should tell Vince Gill that 'Come Rest Your Head (On My Pillow)', their romantic duet from her new album, *Roadrunner!*, was actually inspired by a woman in a funny but slightly crude tank top.

"It had 'cowboy pillows' written across her chest," she says, laughing. Butts had been wandering around after her set at the Two Step Festival in Texas when she spotted the shirt. She jotted down the phrase "cowboy pillows" in her phone, and eventually worked up a tender love song about a woman providing comfort (or a soft place to rest) to a man. She thinks Gill would appreciate the backstory: they're both from Oklahoma and born of a songwriting tradition that, as she puts it, embraces "an unrefined edge" and a little real-life humour.

"It's something I have never been able to put my finger on," Butts says, cross-legged on a couch, in black leggings and running shoes. "But I can feel an Oklahoma artist when I'm listening to one."

Though she's a new name to many, Butts is establishing herself as one of the most dynamic artists to grow out of the Oklahoma Red Dirt scene, unafraid to test boundaries for which the regional (and male-dominated) sub-genre is known. Her 2022 sophomore album found her fiercely fighting for a reclamation of power for her characters and herself, wading through domestic violence, addiction and family trauma. Since then, she's covered

Kesha's 'Hunt You Down,' released a disco remix of Shania Twain's 'That Don't Impress Me Much', made a music video with a drag queen, and created *Roadrunner!*, out this summer, which is a modern redo of Butts' favourite musical, *Oklahoma!*.

Butts may still exude Oklahoma, but she's lived in Nashville since 2019 with her husband, Cleto Cordero, frontman of the Texas-bred band Flatland Cavalry. It's a rare instance when they're both off the road, which means days on the sofa and nights at a local lesbian bar for karaoke. *Roadrunner!* lets Butts lean into the theatricality she's always sprinkled into her persona and live show, where the costumes are fringed and her voice fills the room on even the gloomiest songs.

That theatricality, though, is everything the Red Dirt genre isn't typically known for. Generally referring to the songwriting scene that grew out of Stillwater, Oklahoma, in the 70s and which now encompasses a certain kind of roots, country and rock amalgam that includes pioneers like Bob Childers and Cross Canadian Ragweed, it's also getting a national platform. Oklahoma boy Zach Bryan sells out stadiums, while bands like Turnpike Troubadours are crossing state lines into the mainstream. "It's cool to see these artists have a bigger moment," says Butts, poised to be next in line.

Dierks Bentley, with whom Butts is touring this summer, agrees. "When I first started out, I spent a lot of time touring with artists in the Red Dirt scene," Bentley says. "They have a spirit and passion for authentic storytelling that rivals anyone out there. Kaitlin fits right in. I love her voice, and her lyrics are raw and honest."

Butts was born in Tulsa, but didn't grow up listening to country music. She drove a Lexus, not a truck. And she was a supremely gifted musical-theatre kid, who went to see a local production of *Oklahoma!* every summer.

"There's so much shared between country and musical theatre," Butts says. "There's great songwriting, there's emotion, there's humour, there's witty one-liners. There's murder! All those things have made me the performer I am."

RED DIRT: THE NEXT GENERATION

In his 2020 book *Red Dirt: Roots Music Born in Oklahoma, Raised in Texas, at Home Anywhere*, author Josh Crutchmer pinpoints the 1979 release of Oklahoma musician Bob Childers' debut album as the birth of the Red Dirt movement. Here are four artists stoking the flame that Childers lit.

Dylan Gossett

HOMETOWN Austin

THE BACKSTORY The 25-year-old emerged from nowhere last summer with a pair of bare-bones songs — 'To Be Free' and 'Coal' — that reminded everyone of the power of a well-written lyric delivered without affectation. He also caught the ear of Miranda Lambert, who signed Gossett as the first artist on her Big Loud Texas imprint. At the end of March, he dropped his second EP, *Songs in the Gravel*, containing four songs.

LISTEN UP 'Somewhere Between' beefs up Gossett's sound with drums, while he paints a picture of a restless soul's train-hopping journey across the US.

Kat Hasty

HOMETOWN San Angelo, Texas

THE BACKSTORY A Lone Star State wanderer, Hasty moved all over West Texas, picking up ideas for her sharp songs along the way. She writes about everything from self-esteem to heartache, killing sacred cows in equal measure. "*I'm never gonna be your southern Texas wannabe beauty queen*," she snarls in 'Pretty Things'.

LISTEN UP Hasty's forthcoming single, 'The Time of Your Life', is a wicked kiss-off in which she tells her ex, in vivid detail, how she's "*kissing boys that I don't like, hanging out with folks that drink all night*."

Koe Wetzel

HOMETOWN Pittsburg, Texas

THE BACKSTORY Wetzel's 2016 album, *Noise Complaint*, mixed country with hip-hop and grunge, and promptly made him a cult artist. But don't equate cult with small: the imposing Texan plays to massive crowds throughout the Red Dirt region, drawn to his true tales of drunken escapades and more than one night spent in jail. Expect Wetzel's base to only grow when he drops his latest album, *9 Lives*, in July.

LISTEN UP Wetzel's new single, 'Damn Near Normal', is his take on Bob Seger's 'Turn the Page', only darker. (But no Wetzel primer is complete without the notorious 'February 28, 2016'.)

Southall

HOMETOWN Stillwater, Oklahoma

THE BACKSTORY Read Southall and his six-piece band may have come up in the birthplace of Red Dirt — Stillwater, Oklahoma — but that didn't stop them from taking risks with the genre. On last year's self-titled album, they added heavy-metal riffing to their blue-collar anthems about the struggle to stay afloat.

LISTEN UP 'Scared Money' is Southall's most straight-ahead rocker, but try the searing 'Out Alive' for a taste of their experimentalism. JOSEPH HUDAK

BUTTS WENT to Oklahoma City's Academy of Contemporary Music as the only country-focused artist in her class, so the school sent her to gigs in Stillwater. Acclimatising herself to the historic scene was a steep learning curve. "I had no idea about the Red Dirt community," she says. She remembers turning to her mother to help fill in the blanks. "She told me about Mike McClure and Randy Crouch and Stoney LaRue."

Butts released her first album, *Same Hell, Different Devil*, in 2015, and then took a seven-year pause before *What Else Can She Do*. The album was heartbreaking and serious, but never without sly humour or theatrical flourish. For the title track's video, which dropped just before legislation aimed at criminalising drag was proposed in Tennessee, Butts cast drag queen Paris Van Cartier. She wasn't trying to make it political, but she didn't mind if anyone thought that. Butts grew up around the queer community: her acting and tap teachers were a married gay couple. "It's been normal since I was five years old," she says.

"I think we're in a different age now," Butts adds. "And when someone doesn't believe in the core principles of who I am, which is really that we're all equal human beings, then you can see yourself out the door."

Roadrunner! is sure to widen her platform. While not a song-by-song response to *Oklahoma!*, the album flips the tale into one where women are "liberated and hitting on guys" instead of waiting for their attention. Her version of Kesha's 'Hunt You Down' fits right in. Plus, "[Kesha] is so frickin' country," Butts says.

Covering Kesha was also the perfect way to appeal to new crowds. This summer, Butts is playing Lollapalooza, and she's not worried about whether her music stays neatly in a Red Dirt box. Like the soil it's named for, she views the genre as a place to bloom from instead of being endlessly rooted.

"I don't ever want to be the kind of artist where people can nail me down," Butts says. "Red Dirt is where I learned the basics of storytelling. But I want to be unpredictable."

PREVIOUS SPREAD: THOMAS CRABTREE. THIS PAGE FROM TOP: WILLIAM BASNETT; AXEL MARCENARO; GABE MUNIZ; DALTON LATHAM

Opioids came for country music. It's fighting back

With fentanyl and pills flooding communities at the heart of the genre, artists such as Brad Paisley, Elvie Shane, Jaime Wyatt and others are meeting the crisis in song and in action. *By* Jeff Gage

DRUGS NEVER SEEMED like a problem to Elvie Shane. Dabbling in cocaine, meth and heroin were all part of the future country singer's college days in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Even when he got hooked on speed, the dangers didn't seem real.

"We just thought we were having fun and catching a buzz," says Shane. "It wasn't until I started seeing my friends drop like flies that I realised we were playing with fire."

That was before the opioid crisis ravaged Shane's home state of Kentucky and small towns across the US, like the one where he grew up: Caneyville, population just more than 500. "Hard drugs were a big-city problem," Shane recalls. "The word 'overdose' was very, very rare."

Today, drug overdoses kill more than 100,000 people annually in the US, with fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, touted as the leading cause of death for people 18 to 45. Those figures led Shane to come clean about his drug abuse on the 2023 single 'Pill', one of three songs from his new album, *Damascus*, that address the crisis.

"Those songs are for the people that have been there," says Shane, who got clean for around a decade before scoring a country number one with 'My Boy' in 2021. "So, if you hear the words in my songs, you know I've fucking been there too."

He's not alone in the country world in opening up about addiction. Grammy-nominated singer Jelly Roll explored his past as a drug user and dealer in songs like 'Save Me' and in the Hulu doc of the same name. He's played prisons and recovery centres, and in January, went before Congress in support of anti-fentanyl legislation.

"I was a part of the problem. I am here now, standing as a man that wants to be a part of the solution," Jelly Roll testified. "I was the uneducated man in the kitchen playing chemist with drugs I knew absolutely nothing about, just like these drug dealers are doing right now when they're mixing every drug on the market with fentanyl – and they're killing the people we love."

Brad Paisley saw the impact of the opioid crisis firsthand when he spoke with victims from his home state of West Virginia, where overdose deaths per capita are among the worst in the world. The singer, whose 'The Medicine Will' is a blistering takedown of pharmaceutical firms, lays the blame at the feet of drug-company executives.

"They said, 'These people are the perfect people to target with this. They're in pain. They have powered this country with backbreaking labour, and it's drying up; and we're gonna go get 'em because they'll eat this stuff up, and we'll tell 'em it's not addictive,'" Paisley says.

Country artists singing about substance abuse is nothing new. Alcohol is a ubiquitous subject in the genre, and marijuana is frequently celebrated, while amphetamine use is alternately winked at or swept under the rug.

The no-nonsense response to opioids is a unique moment, according to country-music scholar Amanda Marie Martínez, a doctoral fellow at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "The growing demands country stars are making to take legal action against the opioid epidemic is an unparalleled development," she says. "This is heavily attributable to the severity of the crisis, and a testament to the level of devastation it's caused to communities across region, class, and race."

Opioids are a particularly acute problem in communities at the heart of country music. Tennessee's Davidson County was named the second-deadliest metro area in the US for overdoses in a September report, and the state ranks in the top 10 for overdose death rates. West Virginia is worst of all, with more than 75 deaths out of every 100,000 residents.

Jaime Wyatt, who chronicled her journey from addiction to

PHOTOGRAPHS IN ILLUSTRATION BY JODY DOMINGUE; DANIELLE DEL VALLE/GETTY IMAGES; JOSEPH OKPAKO/WIREIMAGE

ILLUSTRATION BY **ALICIA TATONE**

Cowboy Core Rides Again

From Beyoncé and a fresh class of 'hat acts' to the runway, Western vibes are everywhere – and being reclaimed by those written out of the story

THE WESTERN REVIVAL is underway. After a decade of bro-country sounds and style, where 808s and baseball caps outnumbered steel guitars and Stetsons, country is looking west for a refresh. Record labels are signing artists like Ian Munsick, Catie Offerman and Tyler Halverson, who grew up around horses and cattle. Festivals are being held

OPIOIDS

sobriety on albums like 2017's *Felony Blues*, says that like Shane, her way to substance abuse came through pills – in her case painkillers that were prescribed to her then-partner, who worked in construction. "In America, a lot of people come by opiate and heroin addiction honestly," Wyatt says. "Through injuries, through being overprescribed."

The issue of prescription access runs both ways, as Shane can attest. "I literally got on the internet and got a letter from a doctor saying that I needed Adderall," he says. "I never had to touch a single street drug."

Shane briefly started using again after the success of 'My Boy'. His guilt over losing friends, some of whom he introduced to harder drugs himself, prompted him to write 'Pill'.

Shane believes it is time for the genre to get more honest with itself and not lean on a favourite lyrical crutch. "I feel like country is usually hiding the real shit by talking about whiskey," he says.

Adds Wyatt, "We've got to normalise treatment and therapy, just like you would get your oil changed on your car."

Some artists are working to do just that. Tyler Childers, who wrote about the crisis in his ballad 'Nose on the Grindstone', is a driving force behind the Healing Appalachia music festival, a recovery fundraiser in Huntington, West Virginia. The event, co-founded by his manager,

MASON POOLE; GETTY IMAGES/KEVIN MAZUR

on actual ranches. And stars are stepping out, hats to boots, in fresh-off-the-runway Western wear. Even songwriters who play cowboys on TV, like *Yellowstone*'s Luke Grimes, are dropping country albums.

The pop world is saddling up, too. Post Malone and Lana Del Rey are making country turns, and Bruno Mars is dressing cowboy on Instagram. But it's Beyoncé who is at the fore of the movement, emphasising the core culture by titling her country album *Act II: Cowboy Carter*. "I did a deeper dive into the history of country music," she said. "It feels good to see how music can unite so many people around the world, while also amplifying the voices of some of the people who have dedicated so much of their lives educating on our musical history."

Yes, a cowboy renaissance is upon us.

According to accessible-fashion brand Boohoo, TikTok videos tagged #cowboy recently hit over a billion streams in a month, while Google searches for "cowboy hat" and "bolo tie" spiked more than 200 per cent and 566 per cent, respectively, on the day Beyoncé dropped 'Texas Hold 'Em' and '16 Carriages'.

Halverson, a South Dakota native who makes what he calls "Western Amerijuana" music, says adopting cowboy style is essential to country. "The boots and hat go a long way," he says. "Before we even start singing, you already know a little bit about this person."

Beyoncé used cowboy fashion at the Grammys to telegraph her country pivot, rocking a leather Damier skirt suit from Pharrell Williams's Western Louis Vuitton collection, a bolo tie, and a crisp white Stetson.

"We noticed it," Stetson's marketing boss Tyler Thoreson says. Immediately, the brand reached out to Beyoncé's stylist and began making custom headwear for the singer. When she asked for a crimson hat, artisans broke the brand's neutral-colour rule.

"We don't normally sell a red hat, but for Beyoncé, we made it happen," Thoreson says.

But Beyoncé, who grew up in the rodeo mecca of Houston, is doing more than sparking a fashion trend with her *Cowboy Carter* looks. Her platinum-blonde hair, spurs, turquoise and fringe are helping to course-correct the erasure of Black and Brown people in country culture.

Randy Savvy, the leader of the Compton Cowboys, a California community group that introduces inner-city youth to horse culture, says the Western aesthetic is not foreign to Black history, despite how it's been depicted in entertainment.

"What Americans view as cowboys, they think about John Wayne films or the Marlboro Man, but that is only one fraction of what the culture really is," Savvy says. Beyoncé seemingly used the red Marlboro font for one of her *Cowboy Carter* shirts.

"We as Black people, every time we've entered a space, we've turned it up a notch," says Savvy. "In country music, you got Beyoncé now putting that stamp on stuff."

Halverson, for one, welcomes it. "It's expanding horizons," he says, "and getting country music in front of audiences that it normally wouldn't be in front of." **ELISE BRISCO**

RODEO GIRL Beyoncé rocks a stetson and cowboy outfit at the Grammys

Ian Thornton, was established after 26 people overdosed in Huntington in one day in August 2016.

The festival takes place each September – National Recovery Month in the US – and highlights recovery through testimonials, and tutorials for naloxone, a drug used to reverse opioid overdoses. "This is a drive-thru society that's faced with a real public-health crisis," says Dave Lavender, board president of Hope for the Hills, the nonprofit behind Healing Appalachia. "It doesn't have an easy fix."

Paisley is cautiously optimistic. "There's an enormous amount of hope with this issue," he says. "I think that we crested a wave of enabled, 'legal' drug abuse into now something where everyone knows there's this problem."

Shane and Wyatt have both done the work at their shows, uniting with the programme End Overdose to teach fans to recognise the signs of an overdose. They advocate for venues to carry Narcan and fentanyl test strips, even for non-drug users.

"What we've learned is that drug users are no longer the expendables," Wyatt says. "It's your nieces, your nephews. It's your family members."

It is a lesson that Shane himself learned a long time ago, and one that he will likely live with for the rest of his life. "People need to recognise that maybe just because you do this shit on weekends, that doesn't necessarily mean you don't have a problem," he says. "It starts like that for a lot of people."

"The best thing about country music to me is the storytelling," Crockett says

TOUR DIARY

The Observational Troubadour

Whether on the road in Australia or Nashville, Charley Crockett is always listening for his next song

Photographs by **JAMIE WDZIEKONSKI**

▲ Crockett's preshow ritual always involves his guitar: "I play acoustic as much as possible. That probably comes from my hobo and street-performer days where we would play all day in New Orleans on the corner or in New York City on the subway, or on the street in Colorado."

▶ In the lift backstage at the Forum Theatre in Melbourne, Australia, Crockett and his band carry their own gear. He's not shy about doing things on his own — like releasing all 13 of his albums independently. "I've never been on a major label," he says. "In fact, I just keep dodging them."

"ALL ROSES!" CHARLEY CROCKETT replies when asked how he's doing. The songwriter says he picked up the phrase on tour after hearing a petrol-station attendant use it and is now writing a song with that title. Crockett, a thrilling live performer who can transport country fans to lonesome highways or dusty Western towns with his observational lyrics, is always writing while on the road. His new album, *$10 Cowboy*, released in April, was birthed almost entirely on the go.

"I actually have trouble writing just sitting right at the house. I need to be moving," he says before a gig in Miami. "When I'm on the road, people's stories are just spilling out on the street in front of me, and I'm always wanting to take those pieces."

The other day, he overheard a drifter remark, "I'm not done losing yet," and jotted it down. "It's those things that slowly turn into songs and land on records," he says.

Crockett's been prolifically recording albums since returning to his native Texas, in 2015, after years as a street performer. In 2023, he dropped his 12th, *The Man From Waco*, and began selling out rooms like Nashville's Ryman Auditorium and playing for audiences around the globe: RS cameras captured him at a gig in Australia.

"We're having a lot of success outside of the US," Crockett says. "Maybe over the years, the word of mouth has helped me to be able to go [abroad] and sell tickets. I'm happy about that."

JOSEPH HUDAK

▲ Backstage after a gig, Crockett typically greets friends and then retires to his bus. "I get out of my wet clothes and get the movies on the satellite," he says. "I like to watch a Western or an old French-language film."

▲ Crockett honed his stage moves as a street performer. "It's not easy to get people's attention," he says. "It's about putting down your inhibitions."

◀ Before the concert, Crockett autographs posters and copies of his albums to sell at the merch table. "I sign probably a couple hundred vinyl a night," he says. "And I spend every dollar that comes in on the show. It's really important to me that people leave my show — no matter what the ticket price is — like, 'Man, I got a deal.'"

▲ Cowboy music is red-hot right now, but Crockett's been writing and recording Western-themed songs for more than a decade. "Authenticity should not be mistaken for amateur realism. Authenticity is hard-won," he says. "I couldn't put out *$10 Cowboy* without all those records that came up before it."

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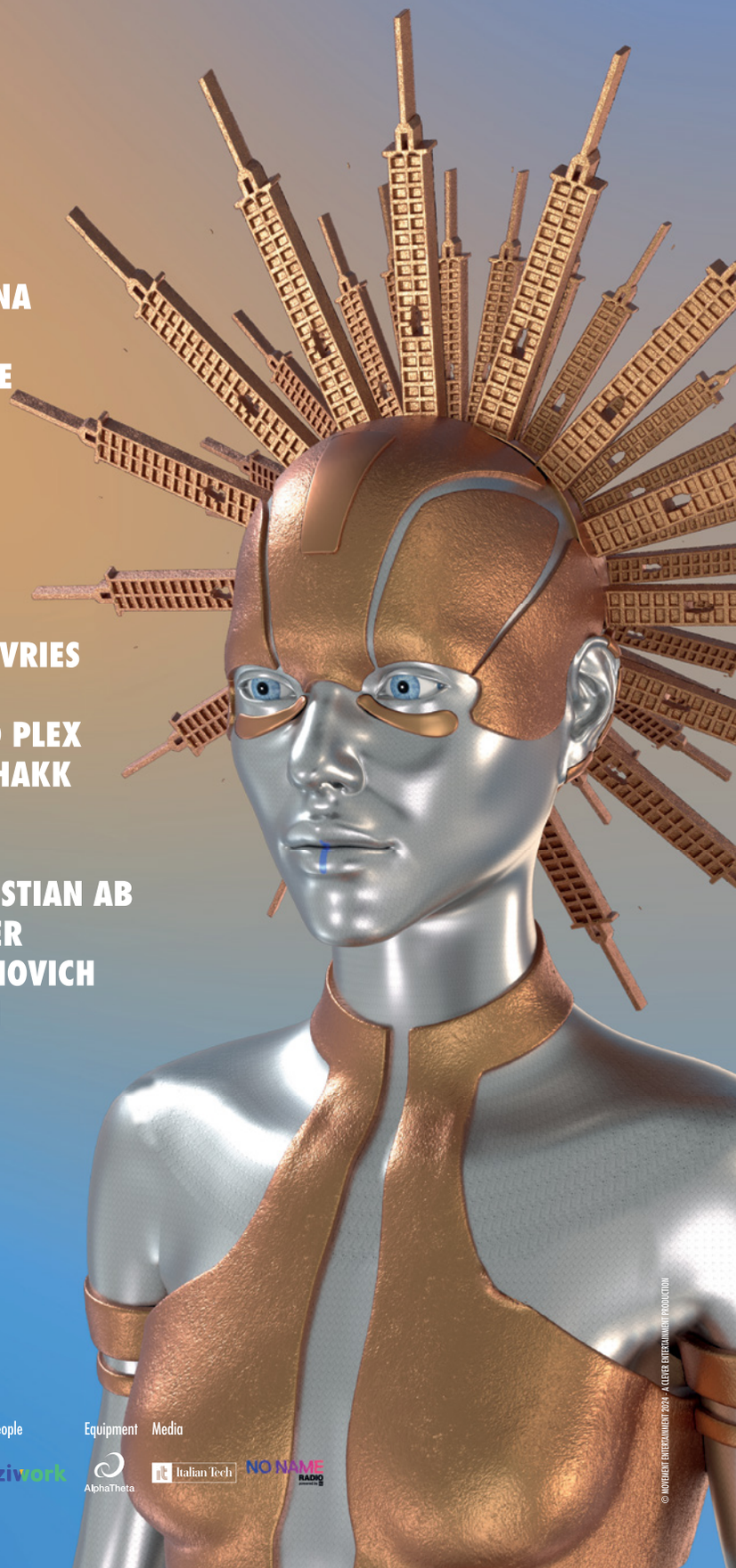

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Music

HAPPY MEDIUM

A collection of crowd-pleasing hits – and misses

Dua Lipa

Radical Optimism

Warner Records

★★★☆☆

WHEN DUA LIPA graced the cover of this very magazine earlier this year, the British pop giant explained that her third album would be an all-out celebration of youth in all its complicated glory.

"This record feels a bit more raw," she explained. "I want to capture the essence of youth and freedom and having fun and just letting things happen, whether that's good or bad. You can't change it. You just have to roll with the punches of whatever's happening in your life." ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Nigel Buchanan

This mantra seemingly went further when she unveiled the record title *Radical Optimism* – taken from an anthropology term coined during the pandemic that essentially posited the importance of refusing to give up in the darkest of scenarios. True to Lipa's word, her third record sees pop positivity – and the importance of dancing through the darkness – become the order of the day. "*The sweetest pleasure / I feel like we're gonna be together*," she practically beams on the sun-soaked, funk-driven opener 'End of An Era'.

Similarly, the psych-drenched 'Houdini' – already one of Lipa's biggest hits as the record's lead single – packs even more power when it's followed by the one-two punch of 'Training Season'. Both tracks proudly wear the sonic DNA of Tame Impala's Kevin Parker. His influence can also be clearly felt on the steady, slow-burning groove of 'Whatcha Doing' which, at times, feels like a blissed-out companion piece to Lipa's previous mega hit 'Levitating'.

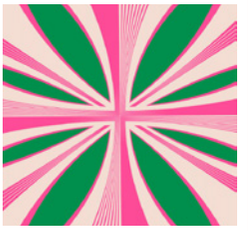
And even if no track comes close to hitting the highs of 'Houdini', there's still greatness to be found. 'These Walls' is an endearing break-up banger, while 'Illusion' is a big, bold dance track that will no doubt soundtrack a sea of champagne-soaked pool parties this summer – even if those beats cover up all manner of sins in the track's ham-fisted lyrics. "*Ooh, what you doin'? / Don't know who you think that you're confusing*," comes Lipa's chorus.

Similarly, the overblown production of 'Falling Forever' and its central cry of "*How loooong*" allows us to imagine what it might sound like if Lipa ever fancied gunning for Eurovision glory. Sadly, it feels like this effort would probably land somewhere on the right side of that competition's leader board.

Another misfire is 'Anything for Love', which aims for earnestness and relatability by including raw audio of the singer's pre-take conversations before becoming a ballad that, in turn, makes way for an airy pop groove. It's every bit as convoluted as that proposition sounds.

This, in turn, feels like a reflection of one of the album's key problems. The aforementioned essence of youth and pop-fuelled fun is undeniably there, but you can't help feeling that it is, at times, a collection of overstuffed ideas held together by a handful of truly great singles. Those songs show that Lipa is still capable of delivering all-out bangers, but it's ultimately hard to shake the nagging feeling that she's capable of doing so much better. A truly optimistic view of this album, you sense, would be a radical thing to find. **NICK REILLY**

THE THREE-IN-ONE METHOD



A. G. Cook

Britpop

New Alias

★★★★☆

IN HIS DECADE at the helm of PC Music, A. G. Cook became a leading light in forward-thinking pop music from the UK. Working alongside SOPHIE, Charli XCX and more, his productions helped shape the sounds of today. Gargantuan new album *Britpop* – which arrives the year after the announcement that PC Music is to wind down and only focus on archival releases – sees him honour this journey so far while dipping his toes into new and unchartered waters. (Read our interview with him on page 104.)

Split into three parts – Past, Present and Future – *Britpop* begins with a retrospective look at the sounds with which Cook made his name. Hypnotising opening track 'Silver Thread Golden Needle' nearly tops 10 minutes in length and is a whiplash-like blast of harsh and pulsating synthetic noise. Demonstrating what Cook has always done best, it then heads straight into the album's title track, a sugary sweet, three-minute pop hit with an assist from Charli XCX.

Most fascinating on *Britpop* is the Present section, which sees Cook put his previously unseen singer-songwriter hat on, delivering lo-fi alt-pop defined by woozy guitars and his soft, understated voice. Electronic sounds always bubble under this new framework on the eight tracks on this section, but he proves himself adept at changing modes while maintaining an innovative feel. 'Greatly' starts out as a sweetly sung ballad before being hit by waves of distorted guitar, while 'Without' finds him somewhere closer to Alex G with its rough lo-fi torrents of guitar.

On the eight-track Future segment of the album, Cook stops short of revealing his next steps. 'Soulbreaker' contains the same kind of yearning, melodic hook that became a defining characteristic of PC Music, but it's peppered with a wailing guitar solo. Closing track 'Out of Time' then rubbishes any notion of Cook fully abandoning his electronic wizardry for a guitar-based future; the seven-minute behemoth is the most raucous and hard-hitting tune on the whole 70-minute album.

While the Past and Present sections of the album feel very defined, Future is – largely by design – the messiest and most ambiguous part. It leaves things wide open for the next steps of the enigmatic producer, but it's guaranteed to be no less innovative or chaotic. **WILL RICHARDS**

A. G. COOK: NASSERI; KNEECAP: PEADAR Ó GOILL; ZAYN: DANIEL PRAKOPCYK

IRISH BAND'S OUTSPOKEN DEBUT

IRISH TRIO KNEECAP can't help but cause chaos everywhere they go at the moment. The Belfast band – Mo Chara, Moglaí Bap and DJ Provaí – have made headlines for their raucous live performances, Sundance-premiered documentary film and brushes with the UK government over funding.

The band's refreshingly outspoken attitude is all present and correct on *Fine Art*; not a single word on this impressive and wide-ranging debut album is minced. Singing in both English and Irish, the trio alternate excellently between one-liners and scything takedowns of British influence in Ireland. Both are delivered with personality and swagger, with the trio committed equally to both modes. Behind it is innovative and wide-ranging production from across the hip-hop spectrum.

Kneecap

Fine Art

Heavenly Recordings

★★★★☆

Upon entering the studio with Toddla T, the band scrapped all previous ideas for the album and started from scratch. Everything from there was written in the community pub the band opened in Belfast, and you can hear it on this raucous and unfiltered debut album.

Fine Art is named after a quote from conservative commentator Steven Nolan, who took exception to a Kneecap mural in Belfast, which depicts a police jeep on fire. "The band Kneecap claim the mural is just a piece of fine art," Nolan said, with the band reclaiming the statement. Unwavering in its politics, side-splittingly funny in its gags and innovative in its musicality, Kneecap have well and truly arrived with *Fine Art*. WILL RICHARDS

THE BEST THING

Paul Weller

66

Polydor Records

★★★★☆

ON HIS LATEST album, Paul Weller takes the record's title, *66*, from the age that he is set to reach just a day after the arrival of his 17th solo record.

It's of little surprise, then, to report that soul-searching and questioning one's place in the universe after a life well lived are at the centre of this consistently varied and surprising new album from a legendary elder statesman of British rock.

"*Soul wandering / Still searching / And I want to believe / In something greater than me/ And I'm humbled by the majesty of the sea / And the stars and your love*," he sings on 'Soul Wandering', backed up by the vocals of Primal Scream's Bobby Gillespie.

Gillespie is just one of several voices who add a collaborative quality to a record quite unlike any other Weller has produced in years. Madness's Suggs lends a loose, laid-back quality on the gentle 'Ship of Fools', while Noel Gallagher provides a moment for guitar fans to relish as he does battle with Weller on the swaggering 'Jumble Queen'.

There is a central irony to the record's end too: the gorgeous 'Burn Out', which sees the great man's ever-strong vocals offset by subtle saxophone flecks and jazz drum stylings. Despite what the title of that song may suggest, Weller is sounding anything but. This album proves that an enduring purple patch of creativity is flourishing throughout his seventh decade. Long may it continue. NICK REILLY

ZAYN'S NEW DIRECTION

WHEN INITIAL DETAILS began to trickle out about Zayn Malik's new album, one of the biggest talking points was the fact that he'd chosen to work with producer Dave Cobb, a man not necessarily known for crafting the sultry, pop-infused R&B that has largely defined the former One Direction star's solo career.

Instead, Cobb is best known for producing Americana heavyweights such as Chris Stapleton and the late John Prine, delivering a not-so-subtle clue as to the surprising left turn that Malik was about to take with his music.

To his credit, the change suits him incredibly well. Directly inspired by Malik's move to rural Pennsylvania after a tumultuous time in his personal life, it's a record that delivers some of the most gorgeous songs of his solo career so far. There are elements of whisky-soaked country greatness throughout, but impressive too is the ability of each song to let his vocals – he was always the strongest singer in One Direction after all – truly soar. "*I've been dreamin, feelin this way*," he softly croons on opener 'Dreamin'', its chorus buoyed by subtle, guitar-driven funk.

Zayn

Room Under the Stairs

Mercury Republic

★★★★☆

It's interesting to note that Cobb came on board at a stage when Malik had almost finished a rawer cut by himself, suggesting that this was the place where he was truly meant to be. "*I've been feeling alienated / On my spaceship alone*," he offers on the raw and often stunning, soul-flecked 'Alienated'.

By mining his personal pain – and heading in a country direction – Malik proves he's still capable of greatness. His first-ever solo show in London will have taken place by the time you read this, and you sense that – after something of a muted start – true solo stardom could be on the horizon. NICK REILLY

Kathy (Jodie Comer) with husband Benny (Austin Butler)

Film

BORN TO BE WILD

Jodie Comer steals the show in this film based on Danny Lyon's book about bikers in the American Midwest

The Bikeriders

STARRING Jodie Comer, Austin Butler, Tom Hardy

DIRECTED BY Jeff Nichols

★★★★☆

FROM *Take Shelter* to *Mud* to *Midnight Special*, American writer-director Jeff Nichols has always delivered taut, thought-provoking, character-driven features, and *The Bikeriders* continues the theme. It's inspired by photojournalist Danny Lyon, who followed motorcycle riders in the American Midwest in the 60s and turned his work into a book of the same name. Lyon's interviews with the subjects helped to inform the script, and the most important recording is that of Kathy, the wife of one of the bikers. She had a sharp, insightful and funny take on the culture she warily bought into, but whose allure she might live to resent.

Kathy is played by Jodie Comer (*Killing Eve*, *The End We Start From*), who is exceptional in the lead role. Listening to her, you can immediately tell the rhythms and the distinctive accent are based on real interviews – and we often see her smoking or drinking in the kitchen or on the porch with Lyon (Mike Faist), who is quizzing her with his microphone and tape recorder. But this isn't just mimicry: Comer keeps up the accent and the delivery authentically when the scene cuts to flashbacks of her life with the Vandals (the bikers' club name is fictional).

Her husband is Benny (*Elvis* star Austin Butler), a handsome and dangerously committed biker; his friend and her potential nemesis is Vandals leader Johnny (Tom Hardy, all furrowed brow and gruff delivery). Meanwhile, supporting roles are very ably filled by actors including Norman Reedus, Emory Cohen, Toby Wallace, Damon Herriman and Nichols regular Michael Shannon.

Butler and Hardy both bring different kinds of inscrutable masculinity, and they get you thinking about the attraction of biker clubs for secretly damaged men. But it's Comer's performance that really stands out, also thanks to the golden material captured by Lyon. Kathy is a complex woman infiltrating a man's world and questioning it from within; her reactions are sometimes smart, sometimes far from that. She feels thrillingly real.

There's very strong violence, and a sense of a twisted fraternal moral code as the men ride from bar to bar, and their network expands. Showing events from Kathy's point of view also underlines the sexism at play, not to mention the very real risk of sexual violence, something that Johnny immediately promises he won't let happen to Kathy – as if that's somehow reassuring. *The Bikeriders* isn't always an easy watch, and the narrative isn't always nail-biting – but it's a fascinating portrait of an era and culture with knockout performances and a soundtrack to match.

21 JUNE **ANNA SMITH**

THE BIKERIDERS: KYLE KAPLAN/FOCUS FEATURES; *HOARD*: LUNA CARMOON; *THE BEAST*: CAROLE BETHUEL; *TIGER STRIPES*: GHOST GRRRL PICTURES

Maria (Saura Lightfoot Leon) with Michael (Joseph Quinn)

ONE MAN'S TRASH...

Hoard

STARRING
Joseph Quinn, Saura Lightfood Leon, Samantha Spiro, Hayley Squires

DIRECTED BY
Luna Carmoon

★★★★☆

WHAT'S IT LIKE to grow up with an extreme hoarder? Hot new writer-director Luna Carmoon gives us an arresting insight in this bold British drama. Hayley Squires (*I, Daniel Blake*) plays Cynthia, a mother who loves to scour the streets at night looking for sparkly things that other people have left behind. She takes her young daughter Maria (Lily-Beau Leach) with her, and the pair bond as they fill their nest to the brim. When events reach a pitch and they are separated, the teenage Maria (Saura Lightfoot Leon) ends up with a kind foster mother, and forms a bond with an older foster kid, Michael (*Stranger Things*' Joseph Quinn).

Hoard is one of those films so grubby that you can smell it – I thought this before I heard of Carmoon's claims that she secretly sprayed the set with the smell of sperm, milk, sweat and blood. Maybe the actors sensed it, but that immersive sense is also due to her startling filmmaking that goes places most gritty Brit dramas wouldn't. Casting and performances are excellent; the narrative feels like it came from a very real place – not too far from the world of writer Andrea Dunbar (*Rita, Sue and Bob Too*). One to watch in every sense. *OUT NOW* **ANNA SMITH**

SEE YOU IN ANOTHER LIFE

The Beast

STARRING
Léa Seydoux, George MacKay

DIRECTED BY
Bertrand Bonello

★★★☆☆

BOND STAR LÉA Seydoux plays three roles in Bertrand Bonello's ambitious century-spanning French drama with a sci-fi twist. Loosely based on Henry James' novella *The Beast in the Jungle*, it sees Seydoux playing Gabrielle, whom we meet in three different eras. In each one she encounters Louis (George MacKay) and experiences an attraction, but the path of their love is far from smooth.

The film's present day is 2044, a post-apocalyptic period dominated by AI where people go through a "purification" process when they apply for jobs. The latter involves suppressing strong feelings – and it also involves past lives.

In Paris, 1910, Gabrielle is a pianist who talks to Louis over some racy art at a society party, attempting to hide her feelings for her marriage's sake. In 2014, she's a model in LA, while Louis is now an incel with dark intentions. Common themes are threaded throughout, playing with thoughts about time, memory, psychic connection... It's an intriguing blend of ideas and styles, some of which work better than others. Seydoux is terrific throughout. *The Beast* is long, and determinedly weird in places, but it's never dull. *31 MAY* **ANNA SMITH**

Léa Seydoux and George MacKay in *The Beast*

(From left) Zaffan (Zafreen Zairizal), Farrah (Deena Ezral) and Mariam (Piqa)

A MONSTER IN OUR MIDST

Tiger Stripes

STARRING
Zafreen Zairizal, Deena Ezral, Piqa

DIRECTED BY
Amanda Nell Eu

★★★★☆

AN ADOLESCENT GIRL is ahead of the class in this body horror set in rural Malaysia. When 12-year-old Zaffan (Zafreen Zairizal) hits puberty, she's ostracised by her schoolmates, but it turns out that her body is going through more dramatic changes than that – and we're with her in her confusion and curiosity. *Tiger Stripes* is both a vivid reminder of nasty schoolyard politics and an insight into a specific culture, with plenty of wit, teenage spirit and a dash of social media.

It won the Grand Prize at Critics' Week at the 2023 Cannes Film Festival, where filmmaker Amanda Nell Eu also became the first female director from Malaysia to be selected for the festival. If you're a fan of subversive genre fare like Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2016), it's well worth a look. *OUT NOW* **ANNA SMITH**

STYLE

WHAT WE WANT AND WHAT WE NEED

BY **JOSEPH KOCHARIAN**

Lab report

Lanvin Lab was created in 2023 in honour of its eponymous founder. Throughout her life, Jeanne Lanvin enjoyed a constant dialogue with all art forms. The second iteration of the Lanvin Lab has seen the French couture brand commission a large-scale sculptural work from Austrian artist Erwin Wurm called *Desire* (pictured below). Known for anthropomorphising everyday objects, Wurm has turned his focus to high-fashion pieces, and in this work makes reference to the Lanvin Pencil Cat bag and Cash sneakers in the signature Lanvin blue. Wurm explains, "Symbols of self-expression are what we desire. We often look for this self-expression in objects, such as a beautiful handbag, that represent how we would like to be seen by others." See *Desire* as it tours the world at destinations close to Lanvin boutiques, as well as at the Fosun Foundation in Shanghai, where a major solo exhibition of Wurm's work opens in June.
lanvin.com

Do the double

Emporio Armani has taken a breezily casual approach to denim for its Spring/Summer 2024 collection. The brand has been experimenting with processes, including using cotton denim for women's shirts and shorts, and colour-buffed leather for men's tapered trousers. Chic women's tailoring includes jackets and wide-leg trousers with embroidered logos in white, dark blue and light blue, while the men's range offers a mix of tailored and casual pieces, with sharply cut blazers, sweatshirts and trousers, as well as wide-leg drawstring Bermuda shorts in a denim-effect jersey. It's an effortlessly cool mix-and-match ethos that we can definitely get on board with.
armani.com

Out in bloom

Contemporary botanical artist Katie Scott is bringing Californian and homegrown blooms to English brand Sunspel. Usually known for its exquisite classics (you can't go wrong with a Sunspel tee), the British brand has commissioned two illustrations from Scott that are inspired by the Californian flora that grow in the same region as the supima cotton the brand uses, as well as the flowers that grow near Sunspel's workshop in Long Eaton in the East Midlands. The palette is a graded monochrome of black, white and grey that provide the low-key chic aesthetic we expect from Sunspel – it's quite the floral fancy.
sunspel.com

Dream weaver

No one knows knitwear like Craig Green, and that's clearly demonstrated in his latest collection. Inspired by reforming and revisiting the language and movements of long-forgotten journeys, he has created a beautifully detailed range of shorts, hoodies, crewnecks and hooded scarves that team bright colours with muted greys and stripes in variable widths. The Autumn/Winter 23/24 collection that hit the runway (pictured left) displayed pieces with plenty of movement and freedom, complete with classic Craig Green oversized stitching, mixed media and fluid details such as fringing and tassels. Available from Selfridges, Harrods and Sense.
craig-green.com
Image: Jack Symes

Crafty core

Haberdashery is enjoying a chic renaissance at MR PORTER with the launch of its Made with Craft campaign celebrating global artisans. In celebration of handmade items, nine global brands – A Kind of Guise, Corridor, Kardo, Kartik Research, Jacques Marie Mage, Story mfg., Stòffa, SSAM and The Elder Statesman – have designed more than 70 styles for the range. Processes such as embroidery, embellishment, handwoven fabrications and hand-selected materials have been used to create the collection, which includes clothing, accessories and jewellery. Made with Craft is part of MR PORTER's Consciously Crafted edit, a curated selection of brands that champion craft, local communities, responsible manufacturing and sustainable materials.
MRPORTER.com

Nan you're a window shopper

Founded by Nigel Waymouth, Sheila Cohen and John Pearse in 1966, London boutique Granny Takes a Trip was popular with the likes of Jimi Hendrix, The Beatles, Marianne Faithfull and The Rolling Stones. Now revived as an online store, its philosophy is firmly on circular fashion, with an emphasis on redesigning, upcycling and reusing vintage items, and offering new twists on leather and denim, as well as opulent pieces made from repurposed upholstery fabric. As with the original boutique, the new iteration has an element of exclusivity: to rent and purchase from Granny Takes a Trip, you need to sign up to become a member. It's a vintage-lover's paradise.
granny.london

SPOTLIGHT

BY
JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

Style curator

Ameli Lindgren is an expert in archival fashion. Her Shoreditch-based shop Nordic Poetry is a treasure trove packed full of high-end designer pieces that Lindgren has painstakingly sourced and curated. Like a fashion magpie, Lindgren has collected some of the rarest pieces, including the Simon Costin for Alexander McQueen Autumn/Winter 1996/97 Crucifix mask, all the while repositioning the store from vintage boutique to archival space with a focus on sustainable fashion. Nordic Poetry is not for the retro rummager, but those who are fixated on high fashion: this is the place to find rare gems, such as Helmut Lang leather jackets and Chanel Runway Pearl sunglasses (pictured).
nordicpoetry.co.uk

CREATIVE DIRECTION BY AMELI LINDGREN AND CURTIS JEHSTA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CURTIS JEHSTA
STYLING BY EJ ELLISON AND AMELI LINDGREN
STYLING ASSISTANCE BY ANAÏS SAINT CHARLES AND SABRINA RASO
MAKEUP BY MEEK KYLE
HAIRSTYLING BY RACHEL LITA
MODEL: ALICE RILEY

LUXURY ACCESSORIES

BY
JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

Restoration game

Selfridges is continuing its drive to change the way we shop. In each of its stores, including Birmingham, London and Manchester, there are accessory spaces selling second-hand and archive pieces, while also providing repair, resale and customisation services. The Handbag Clinic is now a permanent concession that offers repair and restoration of leather goods, as well as a selection of vintage bags and luggage. The department store has continued its long-term partnerships with Byronesque and OOTO (Out of the Ordinary clothing), both experts in sourcing rare and exceptional archival pieces – whether it's iconic Gucci by Tom Ford or retro Jean Paul Gaultier. On the jewellery side, Susan Caplan and Jennifer Gibson have lent their eye for sparkle. The department store's aim is to encourage customers to rekindle their love for what they already own.
selfridges.com

FAVOURITE THINGS

Vintage Coach bag,
£140, at Rokit

Vintage Gucci belt,
£1,050, at Nordic Poetry

Vintage Burberry golf visor,
£100, at Rokit

Vintage Yves Saint Laurent St Tropez bag,
£950, at Nordic Poetry

TIMELESS STYLE

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO LUXURY WATCHES

Golden moment
Audemars Piguet is stepping into the spotlight with the launch of its 41mm Royal Oak Selfwinding Flying Tourbillon Openworked. This is its first timepiece to feature sand gold, an innovative 18-carat alloy that combines captivating hues of white and pink gold that change with the light. To complement the watch's gold case and bracelet, the openworked bridges and mainplate of Calibre 2972 also come in a sand-gold tone, contrasting beautifully with the rhodium-toned components. This blend of technical complexity and contemporary design will make a one-of-a-kind addition to your collection. *audemarspiguet.com*

Clean cut
The Hermès Cut watch is a masterpiece of geometry. Its sleek design, with sharp angles and clean lines, gives it a unique charm. Powered by a Hermès H1912 movement, its polished case and bevel-cut bezel frame the dial and reflect the light. It comes with a matching metal bracelet, but you can also switch up with your style with one of the eight colourful rubber straps which range from white to capucine (bright orange). Hermès Cut is more than a watch: it's a statement piece that can adapt to your changing style from day to day. *hermes.com*

Reach for the stars
The Defy Skyline Chronograph is Zenith's latest addition to its range. The 42mm steel case, featuring an octagonal design with a multi-sided bezel, embodies a contemporary yet robust aesthetic that continues with the star pattern and oversized counters on the dial, as well as the metal bracelet. Also featuring the latest El Primero 3600 calibre, providing precision to 1/10th of a second, the Defy Skyline Chronograph offers style and dependable functionality. Available with a white, blue or black dial, it also comes with a coloured rubber strap. *zenith-watches.com*

Light up the dark

Dive in as Rolex introduces a bold twist to the Oyster Perpetual Rolex Deepsea: a stunning 18-carat yellow-gold edition. Combined with a blue ceramic bezel and lacquer dial, the timepiece exudes sophistication. A technical breakthrough lies within the Ringlock system, featuring a ceramic compression ring to enable the watch to withstand depths of up to 3,900 metres. With its advanced calibre 3235 movement, the Deepsea displays the time with dependable accuracy. It's certainly a design that will turn heads. *rolex.com*

Rebel revival

Unleash your inner rebel with the new THOMAS SABO Rebel at Heart chronograph featuring a striking pyramid design and two-tone dial (pictured above right). This timepiece embodies the perfect fusion of the brand's unconventional aesthetic with functional chronograph technology. The dial features a blend of black and silver elements, with the signature pyramid motif echoed across the hands, indices, bezel, crown and push pieces. With its black chronograph functions and super runner feature, along with a tachometer scale and a transparent acetate date display, this watch exudes sporty elegance with the rebellious edge that you expect from THOMAS SABO. *THOMASSABO.com*

Heritage revisited

TAG Heuer's Carrera Chronograph takes the classic collection for a spin, channelling the spirit of Jack Heuer's iconic 60s 7753 SN design with a stylish masterpiece. Featuring a sleek 'panda' dial and updated with a 39mm steel case and Heuer 02 movement, it blends vintage allure with modern sophistication. It also introduces the option of a steel bracelet for the first time. As worn by brand ambassador Ryan Gosling in TAG Heuer's latest campaign, this timepiece embodies enduring style and contemporary flair. *tagheuer.com*

Aston Martin Vantage

RS ROAD TEST

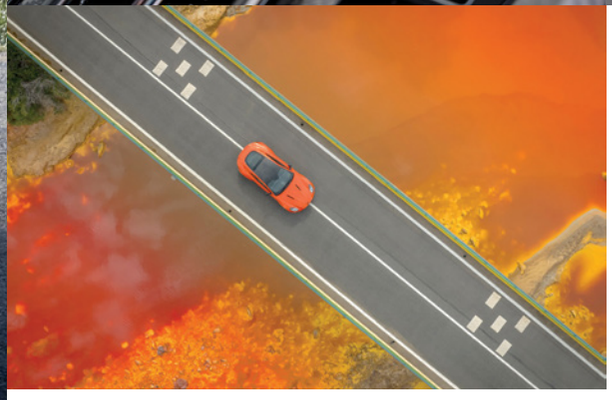
Turned up to 11, the just-arrived and newly potent Vantage sees the baby Aston morphing from Craig David into Daniel Craig, albeit with death metal overtones. Naughty, but nice

It's a balmy 21 degrees in the Monteblanco circuit pit lane, and I'm blinking in the Spanish spring sunshine after the greyest of UK winters, as a hedgehog might on exit from hibernation. There is, though, not a scrap of dullard in me — I'm wide awake and can hear my own pulse. I'm strapped into the new Aston Martin Vantage, open-face helmet wedged on, and just in front of me sits Aston's own Formula 1 pace car, lights ablaze.

It's a view more regularly afforded your Max Verstappens, Lewis Hamiltons and Fernando Alonsos, so that's one for life's bingo card, but at the moment I'm more focused on the currently red lights to my left. When they go green, all I have to do ("all I have to do") is follow the man in front, keep turning (mostly) right, and I'll be back here safe and sound before I know it. Of course I will, this car can hit 60mph from standstill in 3.4 seconds and maxes at 202mph. Back in no time.

Except. Well, except for a few things. A pace car driver's pace is

ANDY MORGAN



geared differently from mine. His warm-up is my Jesus, Mary and Joseph moment, a flying lap surely akin to the last thing I'll ever see. Four corners on from the green light and my aspirations have moved from learning the racing line by following him, to completing a lap before he catches me. And the car I'm in is not currently my friend. It goes hard and noisy in a straight line, but if I brake a bit late or turn in anywhere that isn't the optimum point, and a car declared as having a perfect 50:50 weight distribution front to rear feels awfully like it wants to be a pendulum. Or a £165k embedded monument to momentum and gravity.

Once far-too-much pace man leaves, things improve significantly. I stop looking at the back of him and start looking beyond the ducted bonnet at the track layout and, progressively, find a cleanish way round. The Vantage, it transpires, though a hooligan no doubt, is a Ray Winstone sort. You'd not want to cross it, but it's a lark in the right social setting — one where you're not going to get caught by an unfortunate back-hander.

We're closer to buddies now, the car and I. We see beyond 200kph on the main straight, delight in the grip under duress and dip into Aston's tyre budget by leaving black lines on the tarmac. But, having played naughty for a bit and gotten clean away with it, it seems pragmatic to leave the security of a track environment's wide-open spaces and head for a more familiar road environment, where I'm best suited, and the car would typically spend more of its time. And it's here, if I'm honest, that the Vantage goes from being a car you'd admire to one you'd want.

Firstly, just look at it. The slab nose of its predecessor has gone, and in its place is the traditional Aston grille and a snout that's part former flagship DBS and part One-77 hypercar. And they were $2 million apiece. Combined with swollen rear haunches, the Vantage silhouette is now muscular, strong and achingly good-looking.

Secondly, it's as lovely inside: acres of leather bedeck the cabin, there's bejewelled switchgear, an all-new touchscreen and yet plenty of proper buttons that are intuitive and snick nicely in operation. Plus, a stonking Bowers & Wilkins sound system. It's a good place from which to view the world. Especially when the world is flowing past your window accompanied by the sound of a mellifluous, four-litre, twin-turbo V8 and a baritone exhaust. It's like the old days, but now with 30 per cent more power than before, and it's as it should be. So, too, the on-road manners, which are sharper than before in every way that matters. Steering is meaty but precise, the ride better than a car of relatively modest stature on 21-inch wheels should be, with sufficient compliance and control to build confidence in the press-on driver.

And press on I do, at one point alone on a 28-kilometre stretch of glorious mountain road somewhere outside Seville, with switchbacks and undulations like you see only in car ads or the movies. Here, the Vantage is alive. Pulling at the leash, but fluid and willing, angrier in soundtrack as you row the 8-speed gearbox, deliciously wild and visceral, a bit more Lamborghini than Bentley when it needs to be. Naughty, then, but nice. You absolutely would.

DARREN STYLES

QUICK STATS

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TORQUE
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TOP SPEED
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RANGE
274G/KM
PRICE
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Fran Healy

Travis's lead singer on living in Los Angeles – the inspiration behind the band's forthcoming album* L.A. Times *– streetfights with strangers and the unifying power of music

STEVE GULLICK

This album, *L.A. Times*, is about your experiences of being based in LA. How's it been navigating life there as a British person with an outside perspective?
LA is like the coal miner's canary of the world. It's like a pressure point. If America was someone's body, it would be where the physiotherapist would go, "Does that hurt?" because you've got everything going on there. A homeless crisis that you would never believe in a million years. Why can't the richest country in the world not spend all their money on defences and help the people?

The racism is crazy too, and so is climate change. I've got footage of the road where I'd take my son to school, it's the 405 Freeway, and the whole place was on fire a few years ago! It looked like a Hieronymus Bosch painting. It's a very interesting place to be if you're a sensitive person like me because, for music, all of those things are like little tea leaves, and then, you know, you pour your hot water in, and it comes out as a cup of tea – and in this case it's this album.

And a place where sausage dogs can almost bite your hand off, as you found out...
Oh man, yeah. I've had fights with dogs, fights on the streets with crazy guys. One guy told me to get out of my car and, of course, he didn't know I'm from Glasgow. So, I got out of my car, shouted, "Come on, then!" and he did the scariest single thing that any person has ever done in a fight. He went over to his mate and took his shoes off. Look, I'm a black belt; I can handle myself, but as soon as he did that I was like, 'Oh no, he's an extreme fighter. He's gonna fucking kill me!' But I ended up taking my shades off, and then the guy just went from, like, a million degrees to normal and sort of like, "Well, just don't do that again!" It was very cool.

As for the sausage dog, I almost lost my guitar hand, but I got it back, thank God. [Healy's hand was mauled by a dog he had picked up to stop it from being run over after a car crash.] I've been left with this Harry Potter-looking scar though. The doctor who did the operation was amazing.

Where's the most unexpected place you've heard Travis being played?
I was at a karaoke bar in LA, but I didn't realise it had that [song] until the night went on and I decided to get up and do 'Why Does It Always Rain on Me?' because no one would know who I was. I did, and it was so good! I noticed a couple of people at the bar turning around and thinking, 'He's really in tune for an amateur performer.'

What's the one thing that still keeps you motivated and excited after all this time?
A song – that's it. Trying to write a song and then giving it a bit of time to see if it has a pulse and coming back to it later to see if that pulse has turned into a bit of a heartbeat. I really believe that everyone can write songs, and I feel it's just a matter of patience. Maybe I speak in analogies too much, but look, a song is like one of those little tea lights that's trying to keep a light going in a room and you have to do your best to preserve it. You get in the studio and you have to preserve this thing as best as you can and keep it as close to the original feeling it gave you, or the warmth it gave you, until it's coming out of a speaker in someone's car or someone comes up to you after a gig and tells you, "That song saved my life." I absolutely love that, and I know every person in a band lives for that.

Has there been a particularly memorable instance where a fan has told you how much your music meant to them?
There's been countless, but I really remember this one time in Edinburgh, and a guy came through to the backstage and he was with his daughter. She was maybe 13, and he was in his fifties or forties. He became very emotional as soon as he started talking, and he was saying how he and his daughter had never quite bonded, and he felt quite a distance between them until our band came along and he really liked our band and the daughter really liked our band. They came to the show together and enjoyed it together. That's the best thing ever, and that's what music is good at: bringing people together. It's quite the unifier.

Is there one place you'd still love to play?
Rock in Rio. Have you seen the size of the crowds there?! NICK REILLY

NOS alive '24 Oeiras

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LISBON - PORTUGAL

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UNKNOWN MORTAL ORCHESTRA

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TYLA
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GLORIA GROOVE • LARKIN POE
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NATHANIEL RATELIFF & THE NIGHT SWEATS
THE HEAVY • T-REX

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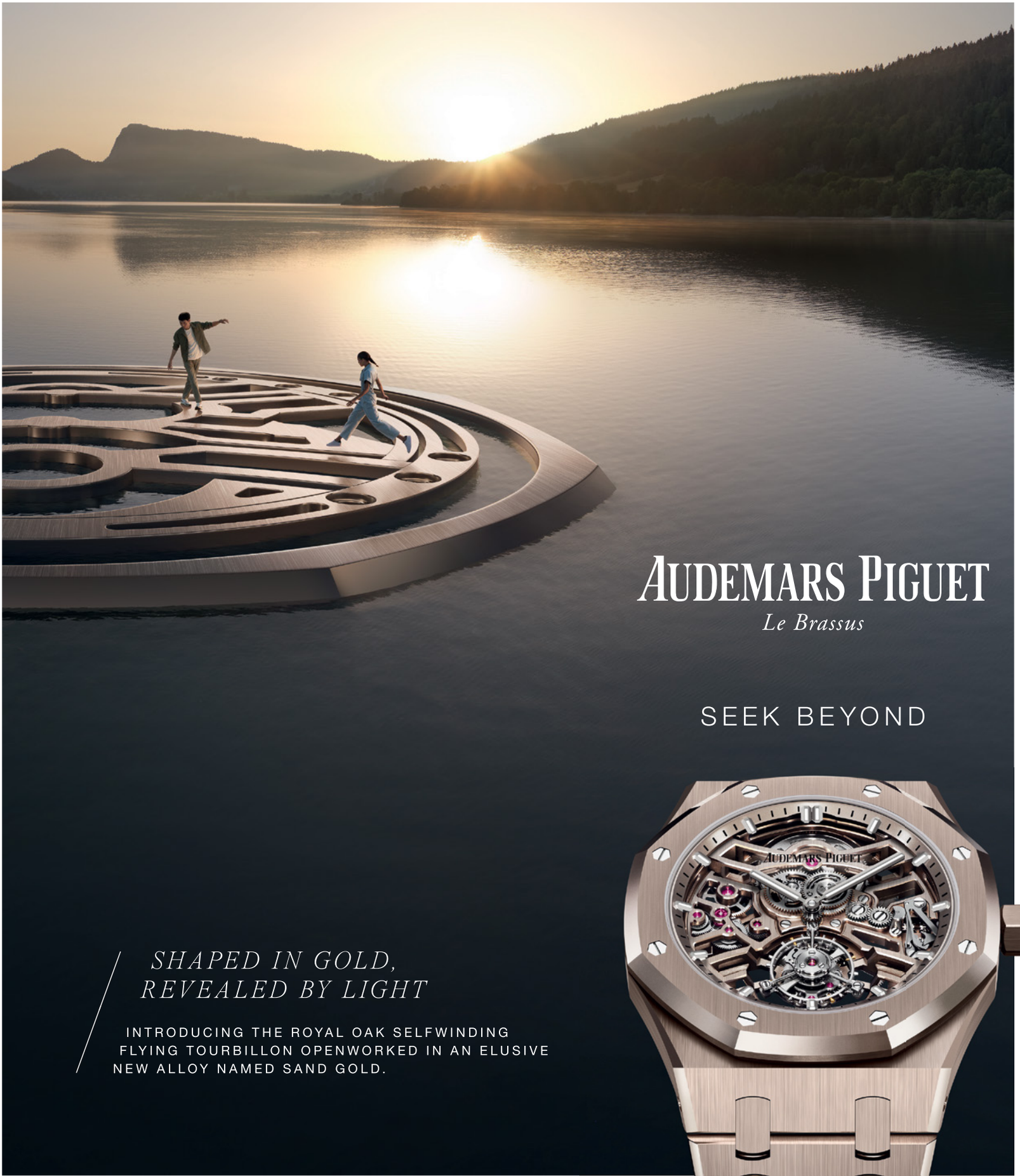

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